
The future of electronic entertainment issue#118
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PLAYSTATION2 | GAMECUBE | XBOX | PC | GBA | PLAYSTATION
PS2 online in Europe; Xb
Murder on the high street
Previewed: Network Bi
Viewtiful Joe, Sudeki, F
StarCraft: Ghost, Eve O
Reviewed: GTA: Vice City,
Splinter Cell, ToeJam & E
Plus: Failed software h
The world's unknown d
Three Kings
GameCube, PlayStation2, Xbox:
Which console will
take the crown this Christmas?
SONY
XBOX





So, Happy Christmas. And with the formalities out of the way, there's pressing business **Edge** must attend to, as you'll have seen from **E**118's regal cover. Sure, the end of December brings a time for celebration, love and peace to all men, but it's also a time for reflection, and for remembering those less fortunate. This is the first Christmas that Europe has seen the three next-generation consoles battling for attention of the general public, and it's conceivable that it could be the last. Those less fortunate, in this case: the owners of the console that finishes in third place.

That won't be Sony, of course. Eighteen months ago it seemed like it might be different and, with Microsoft and Nintendo's Ghosts of Christmas Future lurking on the horizon, the PS2's Lynchian advertising slogan became an easy joke across the gaming community. Now the console is utterly dominant, a position further cemented by the exclusive presence of *GTA: Vice City* (p88). It would be simple to deduce that Microsoft and Nintendo urgently need an equivalent but, in the eyes of the public, quantity is often just as important as quality. A quick visit to the pre-order section of a major online games retailer revealed seven pages of PS2 games, five for Xbox, and three for GameCube.

Circumstantial, perhaps, but it's difficult to deny that casting the net further for supporting software could hurt either of the two companies playing catch up. Global Underground (p72) highlights some of those developers working in places a little more exotic than Guildford, and **Edge** wonders if a broader grassroots policy could assist Microsoft or Nintendo in their quest for second place. Christmas spirit – goodwill to all men, women, consoles and all – means it'd be churlish for **Edge** to damn either machine to an early bargain-basement grave; there's so much left to be decided over the holiday season. It's an exciting time to own a games machine, whichever one it is, and **Edge** hopes that, come December 25, you get everything you deserve.

Features











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the 'crockett's theme' issue









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Regulars







Testscreen

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"What is wrong with Michael Jackson?"

frontend

News and views from e-entertainment's cutting edge



Photography: Nick Wilson

Consoles countdown to Christmas

With record software sales expected this Christmas it's likely to be a crucial period in shaping the fortunes of the three console manufacturers. So who will take the crown? Read on...





According to trade organisation ELSPA, this Christmas is likely to witness record sales of videogame software in the UK. Already the first nine months of the year have seen record software sales, reaching an all-time high of £684m and the body is predicting that the upward trend will continue throughout the Christmas period. Based on previous years, in which there is typically a 140 per cent increase in the last quarter of the year, it estimates that the figure will have risen to £1.1bn by the end of the year, with a record £463m in sales over the holiday period.

Perhaps as a result of this anticipated sales boom, consumers will benefit from an almost unprecedented degree of choice this holiday period, with three consoles to choose from, each supported by a varied range of high-quality games. Indeed the debate over the relative merits of each platform appears to have moved on from vain attempts at comparing nebulous technical specifications to a more concrete evaluation of the range of software that each has to offer and the attractiveness of the price at which each sells. It's also clear that a small but perhaps significant proportion of shoppers will be looking forward to next year's promise of online console gaming when making this year's purchasing decision.

While the commercial dominance of PlayStation2 is unlikely to be challenged in the foreseeable future, the competition for second place remains up for grabs for either Nintendo or Microsoft, and in purely creative terms it's much more closely contested. In any case, with these sorts of record figures being cited, this Christmas will be of enormous importance to all three manufacturers, with each doing their utmost to ensure lucrative profits in the short-term, and a widespread user base from which to build their (online) strategy in the medium- to long-term. Over the next few pages, **Edge** takes an impartial look at the prospects of each platform and the future for each manufacturer. Whatever happens it's likely to be the consumer who wins.

"While the commercial dominance of PS2 is unlikely to be challenged, the competition for second place remains up for grabs"

But it's worth sparing a thought for those who are going to lose out this Christmas. With such an exceptional range of software being released in such a limited period, not every publisher is going to be rejoicing. THQ, for example, has already warned that it won't be able to match its own bullish projections in the fourth quarter of this year. But it's unlikely to be the only party to discover that an unprecedented range of choice for the consumer is coincident with an unprecedented degree of competition among publishers. Still, that's a discussion that will perhaps be perused in a future issue of **Edge**. For now, it's time to accentuate the positive...

PlayStation2

Sony remains the incumbent with good reason: an attractively priced console with online capabilities is supported by the widest range of software on offer this Christmas

Merry Christmas

More than either of its competitors, PlayStation2 boasts a compelling blend of exclusive and multiformat titles, including: *Dynasty Tactics*, *Ratchet & Clank*, *World Rally Championship II Extreme*, *James Bond 007 in... NightFire*, *TimeSplitters2* and *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4*.



Grand Theft Auto: Vice City
Arguably the single most important game this Christmas, certainly the most important PlayStation2-exclusive game



The Getaway
Sony's own take on the crime city sim, *The Getaway* is also likely to boast significant mainstream appeal



The Lord of the Rings, The Two Towers
Another crucial exclusive given the arrival of the second instalment of the Tolkien trilogy due in cinemas this month



Pro Evolution Soccer 2
Having outsold the PlayStation2 competition last year, *PES2* remains the football connoisseur's choice

In truth Sony UK is unlikely to have to do much to maintain the PlayStation2's unbounded position of dominance. Nevertheless, the company has still earmarked a £10m marketing spend this Christmas to promote its console with a flurry of print and TV advertising that will probably be hard to avoid. Although it's the most expensive of the three consoles, requiring an additional outlay on a multitap should you want to indulge in fourplayer gaming, it's still the most compelling console in the eyes of the average consumer. And while its competitors would argue that it's also the least impressive technically, it has the widest selection of exclusive software, thanks largely to its sizeable installed base.

Indeed PlayStation2 already has the largest installed base of the big three, having shipped over 40m hardware units worldwide, notching up almost 8m units of software in the UK this year with a sales value of £256m. As Sony Computer Entertainment's executive vice-president, **Jack Tretton**, recently put it, "Thirdparty publishers are going to build games for our platform first because that's where the dollars are." It remains the incumbent, and in the eyes of most consumers, boasts the most recognisable brand of the big three.

The recent PlayStation Experience provided ample proof of the console's commanding array of software. While titles such as *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4* and *TimeSplitters2* might be available on other platforms, multiformat titles won't be enough on their own for the other two consoles to outperform PlayStation2 – particularly with the likes of high-profile Sony exclusives such as *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* and *The Getaway*. Nintendo and Microsoft might have better individual titles, but neither can match the depth of quality offered by Sony.

And for anyone looking forward to next year, it's clear things are set to get even better for PlayStation2 owners as SCEE initiates its recently revealed online gaming strategy in Europe (see p14), as well as the commercial launch of the Eye Toy peripheral, which might achieve a considerable impact on mainstream consciousness.

Verdict

Barring a disaster, PlayStation2 will be the console of choice for the majority of gamers this Christmas. Reasonable pricing and a selection of software that appeals to almost every audience segment will be enough to ensure that PlayStation2 continues its domination of the market, but the platform is also the exclusive home of *GTA: Vice City*, which would probably be sufficient on its own.

Recommended Retail Price

PlayStation2 is the most expensive console available this Christmas, but then given its massive popularity, it can afford to be. On its own, the console is available for £167, but as **Edge** went to press some of the bundles available on the high street included:

Dixons
PS2 + *FIFA Football 2003* + *Wipeout Fusion* + thirdparty controller £218

GAME
PS2 £170 + first game at £20 + three games at £25 each

Gamestation
PS2 + one game £190

HMV
PS2 £170 + £15 off seven games

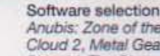
MVC
PS2 + DVD movie + one game £199



Happy New Year

Quite apart from the steady stream of exclusive and multiformat software, 2003 will see the introduction of European online gaming services on PlayStation2 complete with an impressive roster of launch software as well as the commercial launch of the Eye Toy.

Software selection
Anubis: Zone of the Enders, *Ape Escape 2*, *Battle Engine Aquila*, *Dark Cloud 2*, *Metal Gear Solid 2 Substance*, *Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance*, *Shinobi*, *The Sims*, *Sly Raccoon*, *Soul Calibur II*, *Star Wars Galaxies*





SOCOM: US Navy SEALs
SOCOM's headset controls will provide stiff competition for Microsoft's Voice Communicator when it's released next year



Tomb Raider: The Angel of Darkness
A disappointment at this year's ECTS, the next-generation incarnation of Lara Croft remains eagerly awaited



Devil May Cry 2
The sequel to one of this year's strongest Sony exclusives, the further adventures of Dante are an enticing reason to buy a PS2

Xbox

Microsoft seems to have stepped up a gear in time for Christmas, overtaking GameCube in terms of sales

Merry Christmas

Microsoft is the recipient of increasing numbers of multiformat titles, but the fruits of firstparty development also look like ripening in the coming months. Thirdparty titles include: *Dynasty Warriors 3*, *James Bond 007 in... NightFire*, *Robotech: Battlecry* and *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4*.



Splinter Cell
Not, by **Edge**'s reckoning at least, a *Metal Gear Solid 2* beater, but certainly one of the stronger titles available this Christmas



Blinx
Disappointingly average in **Edge**'s eyes and unlikely to steal *Vice City*'s thunder, *Blinx* has nevertheless been well promoted



MechAssault
Another title that disappointed **Edge**, *MechAssault* will no doubt benefit from the Xbox Live hype machine next year



Unreal Championship
The likely choice of deathmatch devotees in spite of the fact that early code suggests significant (and worrying) framerate flaws

After **Edge**'s medical examination last issue, things are looking up for Microsoft, with news that UK sales of the console have overtaken those of GameCube after months of trailing behind. The release of the Sega value pack, consisting of an Xbox bundled with *Jet Set Radio Future* and *Sega GT 2002*, appears to have given Xbox sales a timely boost. Microsoft has also been declaring its intent with a raft of TV advertising emphasising the console's growing roster of titles.

The main thrust of that advertising is the large choice of software available on Xbox by Christmas. Certainly, while Microsoft lags significantly behind Nintendo in terms of firstparty-developed titles, the number of thirdparty exclusives, and the growing diffusion of multiformat titles onto Xbox, is increasingly distinguishing the platform from that of its nearest rival. In a continuation of the Play More campaign, Microsoft is also emphasising the superior technical specifications of its console, including broadband compatibility out of the box – though this is likely to be of relatively minor importance compared to the company's claims that DVD playback is superior to that of PlayStation2, given last year's sales of DVD movies.

Aside from just stepping up its marketing activities though, Microsoft also expects both *Blinx* and Ubi Soft's *Splinter Cell* to materially enhance the fortunes of the Xbox. **Edge** is slightly sceptical, particularly in light of *Blinx*'s disappointing failure to match the hype surrounding the title.

But looking forward to next year, these Xbox exclusives are just the start of a steady flow of a strengthening firstparty roster.

In any case, as **Edge** pointed out last issue, Microsoft is investing in Xbox, and indeed Xbox Live for the long-term, and it's unlikely to run out of money or willpower. And while Xbox doesn't look like matching PlayStation2 in the immediate future, either in terms of software choice or hardware sales, it currently looks like it's in a stronger position commercially than GameCube.

Verdict

Hardly finished then, Xbox seems odds-on favourite to steal second place from under Nintendo's nose thanks to a pronounced marketing push in the build-up to Christmas. A burgeoning software library and Christmas bundles are likely to sway the punters away from Mario and Co., and there's also Xbox Live to look forward to next year.

Recommended Retail Price[1]

Microsoft has introduced its own bundle this Christmas, consisting of an Xbox, *Jet Set Radio Future* and *Sega GT 2002* for £160, which is remarkable value for money and stiff competition for the PlayStation2 but retailers are also offering their own variations:

Dixons
Official Xbox bundle + *Halo* + thirdparty controller £188

GAME
Official Xbox bundle + one game £180

Gamestation
Official Xbox bundle + one game £180

HMV
Official Xbox bundle £160 + £15 off seven games

MVC
Official Xbox bundle + thirdparty controller + one game £199



Happy New Year

Microsoft is probably hoping that Xbox Live will prove to be a killer app next year, and it's certainly already been the recipient of significant mainstream media interest. But it's worth pointing out that Xbox is also set to benefit from a wave of first class Japanese-developed titles, such as *O.TO.GI*.

Software selection
Battle Engine Aquila, *Brute Force*, *Crimson Sea*, *The House of the Dead III*, *Metal Gear Solid 2 Substance*, *Malice* (no longer exclusive), *Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance*, *Panzer Dragoon Orta*, *Psychonauts* and *Sudeki*



Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball
It hardly matters how this will play; it has cannily exploited an unhealthy obsession with female beat 'em up characters



Steel Battalion
The cost of the dedicated peripheral will probably put the mainstream consumer off, but it's unlikely to go unnoticed



Kameo
The real value of the recent Rare deal is likely to become apparent when *Kameo* is released, which will win it media attention

GameCube

It's all looking eerily reminiscent of the N64 for GameCube – which is worrying commercially, but favourable for firstparty software

Merry Christmas

GameCube is set to benefit from various multiformat titles, including *Harry Potter: Chamber of Secrets* and *Mat Hoffman 2*, as well as more exclusive titles such as *Mystic Heroes*. Firstparty software remains the console's strongest feature though, even if import gamers have sampled most of it.



Super Mario Sunshine
Still likely to be selling well this Christmas, thanks to a branded bundle, *Mario* remains the GameCube's unique selling point



Star Fox Adventures
Whether this will hold as much sway in the UK as it did in Japan, the adventures of Fox McCloud are still crucial to Nintendo



Mario Party 4
Nintendo's mascot plumber turns his hand to parlour games once again



Eternal Darkness
It's already been out for some time, but *Eternal Darkness* is still being heavily promoted by Nintendo

So far Nintendo can't be enjoying Christmas that much. First of all the new incarnation of *Super Mario* received a rather mixed reception from Nintendo's traditionally fervidly loyal fan base. Then, hot on the heels of news of a staggering fine of €149m (£94.6m) for contravening EU antitrust laws came rumours that GameCube sales have slipped behind those of Xbox in the UK. And finally there's the troublesome rumours, strenuously denied, that Nintendo is to follow Sega down the software-only route after the GameCube's expiry.

Of course, with the lowest cost base of all three manufacturers, market share is less important to Nintendo than it is to Sony and Microsoft, but with *Pokémon* yet to make the transition to next-generation popularity, the company can't afford to ignore the mainstream consumer.

But longstanding Nintendo gamers can be forgiven a sense of déjà vu. Like the N64 before it, the GameCube is characterised by the most fallow release schedules but, title by title, probably one of the richest software line-ups. While devotees might be willing to put up with long periods of inactivity though, it's hardly a recipe for success with mainstream consumers. The difficulty that GameCube faces this Christmas is compounded by the fact that it's also the only console that doesn't support DVD playback which, given the fact that DVDs sold in record numbers last Christmas, rather hands the advantage over to Microsoft and Sony.

There's also the small matter of Nintendo's traditional tardiness with regard to the European market, which, though matters have improved over the past year, still manifests itself in long delays when it comes to European releases. While Nintendo is exploring the cross connectivity capacity of its hardware in the US and Japan with *Animal Crossing*, for example, **Edge** has yet to hear a definitive announcement that the title is coming out over here.

So while Nintendo continues to rely on a handful of blockbuster titles each year, it's not clear that this is the right strategy to court the mainstream consumer, which is why **Edge** expects it to be outperformed by Xbox this Christmas. And while the console remains an office favourite, and reasonable value for money, Nintendo could still be doing more to reward its doggedly loyal fanbase in Europe.

Verdict

Despite being the cheapest console available this Christmas, the GameCube has slipped behind Xbox in recent months. Although firstparty titles are characteristically the strongest feature of the platform, thirdparty representation is currently looking slightly anaemic. And while Nintendo's lack of clear online strategy is hardly a major weakness, there will no doubt be consumers who are attracted by the connectivity of its rivals.

Recommended Retail Price

Despite price cuts by Sony and Microsoft, GameCube remains, theoretically, the cheapest console, though the new Xbox bundle confuses things slightly. An official *Super Mario Sunshine* bundle, consisting of console, game and memory card, retails for £170, but proved difficult to find as **Edge** went to press. Again, retailers are offering their own flavours this Christmas:

Dixons
GameCube + *Crazy Taxi* + *Burnout* + thirdparty controller £173

GAME
GameCube + one game £150

Gamestation
GameCube + one game £140

HMV
GameCube £130 + £10 off seven games or *Super Mario Sunshine* bundle £170 + £10 off seven games

MVC
GameCube + thirdparty controller + thirdparty memory card + one game £149



Happy New Year

Nintendo still has no clear online strategy in Europe, and software releases are likely to be relatively thin on the ground. Nevertheless, it still boasts the most stimulating selection of firstparty titles – though these may not retain the sort of massmarket clout that is needed to generate hardware sales.

Software selection
1080° Snowboarding Avalanche, *Animal Crossing* (TBC), *F-Zero AC/GC*, *Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance*, *Resident Evil 2*, *Resident Evil 3*, *Wario World*



Metroid Prime
The return of Samus isn't as eagerly anticipated in this country as it is in the US, but *Metroid Prime* looks very promising



Resident Evil 0
Capcom's *Resident Evil* remake didn't sell especially well, but this prequel is exclusive and handsome



Legend of Zelda: Winds of Takuto
Here's a prediction: everyone will have forgotten all the fuss about cel-shading by the time *Legend of Zelda* comes out

Q&A

Darren Carter, director of UK marketing, Sony Computer Entertainment

What will Sony be doing to ensure that the punters will be picking up a PlayStation2 this Christmas?

We shall be focusing on the growing range of games available for the PS2. This year is our biggest in terms of advertising and promotion due to the sheer number of killer titles coming out before Christmas.

What is the strongest aspect of the PlayStation2 software line-up this Christmas?

The fact that there is such a wide choice of titles available in every conceivable genre. Whether you're a hardcore or casual gamer, whether you're a PSone owner that is trading up or the PS2 is your first machine, there's a type of game to suit everybody in every category.

Why, in your opinion, should consumers choose a PlayStation2 over the competition this Christmas?

We don't comment on competitors' activity, but as stated already, the sheer quantity and quality of titles across the board on PlayStation2 means you are sure to find many games in every category to suit every taste.

As to the threat from other forms of entertainment, most consumers maintain a healthy balance of their entertainment time. There is no reason why this should be any different at this time of year. And while we may not receive revenue from DVD movies for example, the fact that PlayStation2 can play music, DVDs and games out of the box probably makes PlayStation2 a sound, value-for-money purchase.

There seems to be an unprecedented number of releases this Christmas. Is there a danger that there are too many games being released? After all, there's only so many games that the public can buy.

There is always a danger that some quality titles will miss out because of the large number of games being released between now and Christmas. But ultimately it's the games-buying public that decide which game wins and which loses. You rarely get to number one without producing a very good game.

Is this traditional reliance on certain key periods in the year actually sustainable in the long-term? Is there anything that can be done to spread the flow of releases so that they're available all year round?

Some of the biggest selling games in PlayStation history were released outside of the so-called, key Christmas selling period. *GT3* was released in June, *Driver* (May), *Final Fantasy X* (May).

A good game can sell at any time of year and will continue to sell right up to Christmas. Having said that it is also inevitable that a proportion of the games market (as is the case with the wider entertainment market of music, DVD, video) involves gift and seasonal purchases.

Looking forward to early next year, what will Sony be doing to try to maintain the momentum that's traditionally gained at Christmas?

We will be releasing some key titles in the early part of 2003. *Primal* is one of our key titles that has been receiving great previews and will be heavily promoted on TV in the New Year. The first *Tomb Raider* game on PlayStation2 is also scheduled for release in February so the momentum from Christmas is sure to be maintained.

Richard Teversham, head of UK Xbox marketing

What will Microsoft be doing to ensure that the punters will be picking up an Xbox this Christmas?

We realise that this Christmas is an important one for Xbox, as it is for the entire industry. We're committed to providing value to gamers, and that commitment is coming through in initiatives like the Sega Christmas Pack, which has proved extremely successful at retail. We also have developed some marketing initiatives designed to broaden the Xbox brand appeal in innovative ways. We're giving away a DVD called the Xbox Difference, which uses interactive elements to show gamers what they can experience with Xbox, instead of telling them. Playmore.com continues the Xbox tradition of strong online marketing elements with a unique and compelling set of playful content, demonstrating the essence of Xbox. And there's the Xbox MegaCruiser, it's a huge Xbox truck that will travel Europe inviting consumers to play more. In additional we have a massive TV campaign and retail presence. Put it like this, you won't be able to miss Xbox this Xmas.

What is the strongest aspect of the Xbox software line-up this Christmas?

Two aspects – quality and quantity. We have games such as *Splinter Cell*, *Blinx*, *Unreal Championship*, *MechAssault* and *Sega GT 2002*, all of which are exclusive to Xbox and have received quite a bit of critical acclaim already. In fact we have 18 exclusive titles this Christmas, with nearly 200 Xbox games available in total. When you consider the fact that we haven't even been out in Europe for a year yet, we think the quantity and quality of our software portfolio is pretty amazing.

Why, in your opinion, should consumers choose an Xbox over the competition?

Because Xbox is the absolute best-value videogame system available. If you consider the hardware, we have an in-built hard drive, an in-built broadband adaptor, no memory cards needed, the most advanced graphics and sound ever seen in a console, and all for £160 this Christmas. Oh yes, and you get two great games for free, right in the box. Then consider the great software portfolio, and Xbox Live. If you look at this total offer, it's clear we're very well positioned against the competition. And as for DVD, Xbox offers the best-quality DVD playback of any console – we do not see DVD as a threat, rather as an extension of the value Xbox offers gamers.

There seems to be an unprecedented number of releases this Christmas. Is there a danger that there are too many games being released? After all, there's only so many games the public can buy.

It's really a good time to be a gamer – it's true that there's loads of quality games out there at the moment. It's also true that most gamers will only be able to experience a fraction of those titles. I think the Xbox portfolio is doing a great job of balancing quantity and quality – we have enough titles to provide something for every taste and every gamer, but not too many that we have lots of different titles in the same genre competing with each other. We work closely with our thirdparty and retail partners to ensure the mix is spot-on and everyone wins.

Looking forward to early next year, what will Microsoft be doing to try to maintain the momentum that's traditionally gained at Christmas?

We're heading up to our one-year anniversary and the launch of Xbox Live at retail, which is an incredibly exciting time. We believe Live will truly revolutionise gaming – beta users have been more positive about the service than we had ever hoped for, and we think Live will help continue the momentum from this successful Christmas. We also have some surprises lined up – March is going to be an exciting month for Xbox.

Andy Williams, general manager, Nintendo UK

What will Nintendo be doing to ensure that the punters will be picking up a GameCube this Christmas?

We have already launched our *Super Mario Sunshine* bundle, which continues to sell well. We are also working with retailers to create their own in store packaged bundles. The Nintendo GameCube remains the lowest priced next-generation console, which we will be promoting in store. We have a huge marketing campaign running over Christmas including TV advertising, print advertising and online advertising and we will have a massive in-store presence with POS, store windows and gondola ends. In addition there will also be DVD cover mounts and DVD retail giveaways showcasing the titles soon to be released on GameCube.

What is the strongest aspect of the GameCube software line-up this Christmas?

Blockbuster titles that people want to play. We have a number of these that have been and are still to be released in the run up to Christmas. These include *Super Mario Sunshine*, *Eternal Darkness*, *Star Fox Adventures*, *Die Hard Vendetta* and *Resident Evil*. In addition to this we also have the WaveBird Wireless Controller which, having no wires and allowing games to be played up to 20ft away, adds an extra element to gaming on the GameCube.

Why, in your opinion, should consumers choose a GameCube over the competition?

This again goes back to our line-up of games. We will have over 100 games available for the GameCube this Christmas of every genre including our exclusive blockbuster titles, which I have already mentioned. We then have more superb blockbuster games coming next year, such as *Metroid Prime*, *1080° Avalanche*, *The Legend of Zelda* as well as exclusive thirdparty titles such as *Resident Evil 0*. With all these, the GameCube is the essential console to have for Christmas and for 2003, and it's the lowest priced next-generation console on the market.

There seems to be an unprecedented number of releases this Christmas. Is there a danger that there are too many games being released? After all, there's only so many games that the public can buy.

There are a large number of releases available this Christmas and there will be a substantial number of games sold but there needs to be a wide range of games available to cater for all different tastes. Nintendo GameCube has a superb range of games for Christmas covering everything from sport, racing, action adventure, RPG, fighting, puzzle and horror. We are also targeting our marketing campaigns to ensure that we stand out from the crowd

Is this traditional reliance on certain key periods in the year actually sustainable in the long-term? Is there anything that can be done to spread the flow of releases so that they're available all year round?

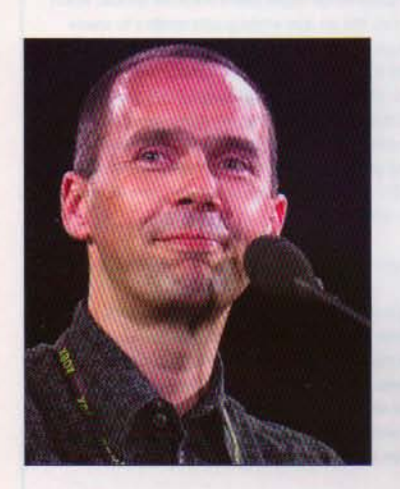
Christmas and Easter are key periods for game sales, however this is more about fulfilling increased demand at these busy periods rather than saving the best games for them. There are huge opportunities outside of these periods and if a blockbuster game is released, gamers will still buy it. We will be launching blockbuster games throughout next year, not just at Easter and Christmas.

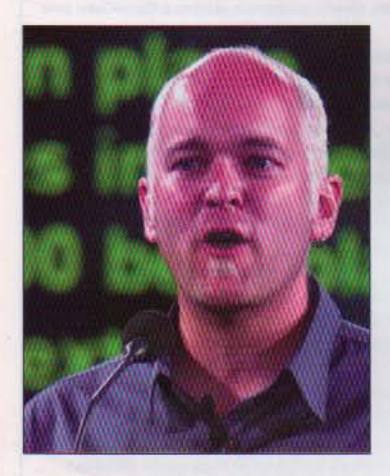
Looking forward to early next year, what will Nintendo be doing to try to maintain the momentum that's traditionally gained at Christmas?

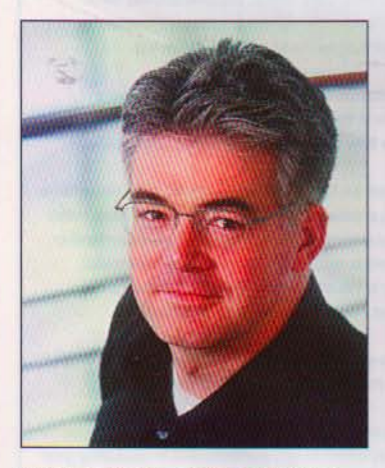
In the New Year we will be showcasing our 2003 software line-up, which highlights that Nintendo remains dedicated to producing great games and that there is a lot for gamers to look forward to on the GameCube in 2003.

Edge experiences Xbox Live

Michel Cassius, director of publishing, Richard Teversham, head of UK Xbox marketing, and J Allard, general manager quizzed







From top: Michel Cassius, J Allard and Richard Teversham are keen to evangelise Xbox Live, but also want to stress Microsoft's long-term ambition

Is it possible to change your online ID?
MC: No. One of the key aspects of Xbox Live is the GamerTag. It's there for multiple reasons. Firstly, because you need an ID within a service that you can grow – it's there for yourself, as well as your friends. Secondly, it's for security. We want to make sure that people don't pretend they're others, using other people's ID, and so on. There's plenty of security beyond that that makes it difficult – impossible – to change.

How are you policing the service?
JA: Creating these GamerTags means that everybody knows who you are and you will get a reputation. Whether you're a foul-mouthed jerk or whether you're a cheater people will grow disinterested and impatient with you and you won't be able to hide from that. By having the centralised server and by having the GamerTag we can do things like monitor how many drop sessions you had and we can publish that if we choose to – like an eBay rating. There are tons of legal implications. It's one of the challenges of rolling out in Europe – local law and policy from country to country varies so much and online policy and law is evolving so rapidly. One thing that we're vigilant about is privacy. Your performance online is viewed anonymously by our data centre. You're just a big number, we don't track what you do.

Can you get kicked off? How far can you go before that happens? Can you reapply?
MC: If you say to someone, "You shouldn't do that, it's not good for the game, for others," and they don't listen, then yes, in extreme cases, I guess we would have to.

JA: How often do you walk down the street and see two strangers being incredibly rude to each other and using foul language? Not very often. How often do you see that on the telephone? Not very often. How often do you see that on the Internet? A lot. One step of anonymity gets removed once you start using voice, it's much more intimate.

How are you going to market it in Europe?
MC: Marketing has essentially been PR and Web, because it's an active community we're going after. We started consumer beta this week, with 3000 users. It took 20 hours from the moment we accepted applications to the moment it was oversubscribed. The majority are from the UK, then from Germany.

RT: You buy the Xbox Live pack from Xbox.com for £40, from November 30. Anyone who wants to can do that. But we're calling it Test Drive because we're going to be learning from it as well. But the good thing is that those who sign up, their subscription won't start until March 14, which is when the kit goes on the shelves.

Are there only two demo games?
RT: Correct. In the Test Drive kit, that's *MotoGP* and *Whacked!*.

MC: We haven't announced what they'll be in the retail version. It will be slightly different.

RT: Just to add, there'll be seven games with Xbox Live out for Christmas. And there are other games, like *Splinter Cell*, where you can go online and download new levels. So although they're not Xbox Live enabled, there's addition functionality. And by the end of next year we'll have over 50 games.

Will *Phantasy Star Online* be coming to Europe? Can we expect any other MMRPGs?
MC: Well, of course, *Phantasy Star Online* will be coming to Xbox, at the beginning of next year. We've got a few other games that are coming. LucasArts, for example, has announced its 'Star Wars' MM licence for Xbox. At the beginning it's going to be multiplayer games and downloadable content. Later comes the massively multiplayer games. And then I think we're going to see what I call event-led type of games. Take racing games for example. Every Wednesday, in the UK, Xbox Live customers can come online, download a new circuit, train for an hour, and then race. But that's coming in time.

RT: Imagine a time when North London can play South London at a game, or Scotland, England, Wales, Northern Ireland, or, France, Germany, Britain, all their champions. We'll call it the World Series obviously – but that sort of thing will actually become possible. And also, with the GamerTags, that'll make some gamers almost celebrities across the world, in a way. There'll be Websites with "Who's the *Halo* champion?"

You mentioned the system will be self policing. On *MotoGP*, there are already users with ridiculous lap times, people who've worked out ways around the system...
MC: Well, I have not been on *MotoGP* for quite a while. What's the lowest laptime?

About a quarter of a second.
MC: Well, it's not supposed to be like that. I haven't seen it. I'll discuss with the *MotoGP* guys and figure it out. You're not supposed to be able to do that. That's my answer.

How important is Xbox Live in bringing new people to the Xbox?
MC: At the start, online gaming will be a subset of people who own the console. But I think some people will go and buy an Xbox because there are some games that you can play online – I think *Unreal Championship* will be one of those – and that will drive people towards Xbox.

What's in it for broadband operators? The deal with BT has been announced, but on the surface it appears Microsoft is controlling all the revenue streams.
RT: It's interesting, because we've had meetings with NTL, BT, Telewest, and they're really keen to get on top of this. With Xbox and Xbox Live, this is the first real act that'll get people to want broadband. Because today, broadband's great if you want to download this or do that, and maybe for PC gamers, but also we've got to remember that Xbox Live gives operators the potential to evolve their service in many different directions.

If you look at our competitors, there are only a couple of companies who have the resources to put on Internet gaming with the security and the way you communicate. So we're providing a much more accessible service to a lot of thirdparty publishers.

The ISP-specific instructions with Edge's starter kit necessitated a PC too, in order to register the Xbox's MAC address with a service provider...
MC: Well... there are ways to do that, but... you're right. Some ISPs... I mean, when you look across Europe, just in the UK you have BT, Telewest and NTL, and some others. You have multiple configurations, depending on where you are, geographically in the UK, what type of provider, what type of network

they have, so you have different configurations. Right now, we haven't found one that doesn't work.

It would seem that this hardcore community that you're targeting – those with broadband, a PC, and an Xbox – is a similar demographic to those involved in the Xbox homebrew scene. But the new Xbox Live dashboard appears to be causing box-breaking problems with those same people. Was this deliberate, or a happy accident?

MC: The update of the dashboard is something that's necessary, to be able to play online. There was no misintention with that. The intention was to make it a simple experience, to make it as simple as it is to play an offline game. But if that interferes with people who have interfered with the hardware, it's their problem. When you change something in the hardware, it's very explicit. When you buy an Xbox, if you open it up, do something to the hardware, it's your liability, not ours. And if it doesn't work, well, shame.

There's no denying that the Xbox is suffering from hacker problems?

JA: It's flattering isn't it? Hacker activity on Xbox is through the roof, I mean nobody is trying to hack a GameCube – they're uninterested. So it will make a pretty interesting target but at the same time I think we acknowledge that we're going to be a big target. So we have military grade security in our data centres – I mean we have safes in our security, you know my key, your key, on my mark three, two, one, we have armed guards in our facilities – this is serious stuff.

In conclusion, where do you see the Xbox in four years' time?

JA: Here's the thing. We set out to build the Ferrari of videogame systems. We are the most patient company in the world. The Xbox business is a 20-year business. It's not a quarter to quarter business, it's not how many units do we sell this Christmas – I mean we watch those things, we're careful about those things, we adapt our strategies because of those things but we're taking a very, very long-term outlook into this business.

Set-up procedure and Edge's initial Xbox Live impressions

The standard Xbox Live beta-testing kit comes with a headset, memory card, and a CD with a cut-down version of *MotoGP* and *Whacked!*. Inserting the CD in the Xbox drive instigates an immediate change. Games with Xbox Live components automatically install a new version of the Xbox dashboard over the top of the pre-installed version. While a seamless transition for most users, those using homebrew frontends such as Evolution X will find their emulator-friendly interfaces replaced with Microsoft's official interface. And, in a move that some cynics will view as a deliberate attempt to strike at the chipped Xbox community, attempting to reinstall Evolution X over the Xbox Live frontend kills the box completely. Inevitably there are routes around this, but, at the time of writing at least, they're somewhat tortuous.

Edge experienced no such problems, attempting to skip straight into *MotoGP* for a quick race. It wasn't to be; if the Xbox isn't properly configured it won't be able to find the Live network, and will move straight to a troubleshooting process. The manual configuration allows users to input all the IP options you'd expect from a standard networking program (host IP, DNS servers, masks and so on), so it seems Xbox Live users won't be limited to those ISPs Microsoft has closed deals with. Indeed, **Edge** initially connected through the company network with little trouble, following a brief consultation with Future's Net-savvy computer services department. Later, with some small configuration changes, the same box connected through Telewest perfectly.

Each copy of Live comes with a 25-digit alpha-numeric registration code, which is then exchanged online for an available username of the player's choice. This stage of the signup was made unnecessary (and, indeed, unworkable) by the presence of the memory card, which contained all the pre-arranged details for **Edge**'s account. Once the account details are confirmed users can go online immediately, and, while the manner in which this happens depends somewhat on the game being run, **Edge** only experienced problems when Future Publishing's network was having problems. In other words, the system appears to be as strong as your service provider, although the true test will come when masses of helpdesk-less consumers attempt to go online.

MotoGP

The racing highs here have been extensively documented in **Edge**'s review (see **E**112), so there's little point in expanding on the game mechanics. More interesting, perhaps, is how THQ and Microsoft have hooked the online facilities here in with the retail version of the game, released some months ago. Players with just the beta-test kit can play with three circuits and a clutch of riders, but if the game detects a retail *MotoGP* saved game on the Xbox hard drive, the appropriate extras are unlocked. Which seems fair enough for everyone, particularly those who've rented, borrowed or sold a copy of the game prior to their kit arriving.

Online matchmaking is smooth – players can search for games which tailor specific requirements for tracks, realism, laps, rules and so on, or they can select quick play and get thrown into the first available race. Even with the limited number of beta testers this doesn't take more than a couple of minutes, often less, and 16-player races are phenomenal. Voice communication (minus some of the more warped filters) is crisp and easy, transatlantic conversations lacking lag and adding so much to an already excellent game. If there's one thing that frustrates it's that those without anything unlocked have to race as ghosts when the extra courses come up to play – and if there's a factor which shows this might just work in THQ's favour after all, it's how close **Edge** was to buying (another) copy of the game just so it could play the retail tracks at work on the day the kit arrived.

Whacked!

While **Edge**'s experiences with *MotoGP* have been nothing short of outstanding, persuading even non-bikers in the office to slip into the leather pants of Climax's excellent racing game, *Whacked!* has proved the polar opposite. Nominally a thirdperson beat 'em up in the mould of *Powerstone* or *Fur Fighters* multiplayer sections, it looks like it's destined to have the same graceless build of *Fuzion Frenzy*. Each battle takes place in a simple (though smartly textured) arena, and combat means frantically dashing from one weapon to another and hurling them in the direction of opponents.

But the weapons lack any presence or impact, a surprise in a game full of slapdash over-the-top presentation, that grates after a few seconds of the introduction. Different sets of rules supposedly provide some variation, so in one game type you'll be hitting players and trying to collect the stars they leave behind, whereas another may see pure deathmatch-style combat. But really, all the options are fairly uninspiring, and if there's one thing that's indicative of this it's the amount of silence on the Xbox communicators whenever **Edge** goes online. There's little conversation between the four players; they run around, hit each other, and leave. Shame.

CUTTINGS



Nokia brings out games platform

Mobile phone manufacturer, Nokia, has announced a new drive to bring "console-quality games" to mobile handsets. The move will see the company act as a publisher, as well as working with thirdparty publishers and developers including Sega.

To coincide with this new strategy the company will be bringing out a new 'game deck' series of phones to reduce the problem of multiple hardware configurations. The first phone in the new series, called N-Gage, will launch next February, running on the Nokia Series 60 platform and Symbian OS, with games distributed on removable memory cards.

DTI analyses industry

The Department of Trade and Industry has produced a report on the state of the UK videogame industry. The main finding of the report, called 'From exuberant youth to sustainable maturity', is that UK publishers are less successful globally than their developer counterparts. While UK developers are responsible for 15.6 per cent of global sales (no doubt in large part because of the likes of *Harry Potter* and *GTAIII*) publishers enjoy just 5.7 per cent, of the global market, thanks to the regionalised nature of the European market and low investor confidence in the UK. With annual sales set to reach £20bn globally by 2007, the report also made several recommendations to help improve the perception of the industry among investors.

Nintendo fined for price fixing

Nintendo has been fined €149m (£94.6m) as a result of a recent legal judgement that found the company had broken EU competition laws. According to the ruling, which concerns the company's distribution practices between 1991 and 1998, the company had obstructed cross-border sales in Europe in a bid to maintain artificially-high prices.

Although the legal implications of the ruling are marginal given that Nintendo has since complied with the ruling, the size of the fine will be problematic, and the company intends to lodge an appeal in a bid to reduce it.

Sony announces online strategy for Europe

No mention of narrowband as Sony reveals spring 2003 launch for European networked services

SCEE has finally announced that PlayStation2 broadband network gaming will be launched in the spring of 2003 in the UK. The service will be available through both cable and ADSL connections, with consumer trials to commence before the end of the year. The company then plans a staggered rollout to introduce online services across Europe, starting with Germany, France and Spain. The company has also announced that online services will be introduced to Australia next year.

Although the UK still has relatively low broadband penetration compared to other European countries, Sony's **David Reeves** believes that the new services may actually drive uptake, arguing that it "will accelerate broadband adoption in Europe and provide a catalyst for rapid expansion of the total gaming market." Nevertheless, according to a recent study by Jupiter Research, the UK still has just 7 per cent of Internet users connected to broadband, compared to 11 per cent in France, 17 per cent in Spain and 29 per cent in Sweden. Still, there was no mention of narrowband compatibility in Sony's announcement, and it's as yet unclear whether European gamers will be able to access PlayStation2's online services through a dial-up modem.

The announcement has been anticipated ever since Sony launched networked gaming services in Japan and the US, where PlayStation2 owners have already been able to play the likes of *Final Fantasy XI* and *SOCOM: US Navy SEALs*. Indeed *SOCOM* has already sold over 400,000 units in the US, with around 175,000 people playing regularly online, prompting Sony to declare that "PlayStation2 has become the leading online console gaming platform." Which is perhaps a response to Microsoft's earlier claims that Xbox is the leading broadband-enabled videogame console.

"It will be simple to set up, exciting to play and affordable," stated **Chris Deering**, president of SCEE. "Our philosophy is to have a very diverse and inclusive platform that will enable content companies, games publishers and ISP portals to provide consumers with the broadest selection of new online experiences and entertainment from a variety of sources."







SCEE will be spearheading its broadband services with an impressive software line-up, including *SOCOM* and *EverQuest*

To support the broadband gaming service the company will be introducing the Broadband Gaming Pack, consisting of an Ethernet Network Adaptor, an online game and a start-up disc featuring demos of forthcoming games, which will retail for £45. A memory card will also be needed to be purchased separately to store settings, while a secure environment for commercial transactions will be enabled by Sony's Dynamic Network Authentication System (DNAS).

The initial wave of network enhanced software to accompany the launch is looking very promising, with the line-up including: *SOCOM: US Navy SEALs*, *Hardware: Online Arena*, *Destruction Derby Online*, *Twisted Metal Online*, *Frequency 2*, *My Street*, *ATV Offroad*, *This is Football 2004*, *World Rally Championship Online*, and a new PlayStation2 version of *EverQuest*. With Xbox Live set to launch at a similar time next year, these are set to be interesting times.

ELSPA organises digital distribution discussion

BT Openworld inaugurates its new membership of the European trade body by hosting digital debate at the BT Tower

To coincide with the recent announcement that BT Openworld has joined ELSPA to promote closer relations with publishers, the two bodies hosted a conference dedicated to the future of digital distribution at London's BT Tower. There was a healthy turnout for the one-day conference entitled 'Digital Distribution of Games: How to Exploit the Opportunities of the Recently Tested Business Models and Evolving Anti-piracy Solutions', no doubt partly due to the fact that it was followed by a party to allow delegates to network and hobnob.

Show of initiative

According to ELSPA's director general, **Roger Bennett**, the conference is the first of many such events. "This conference is the first in a series of major initiatives that ELSPA is planning to organise," he declared. "We believe it is essential that such events are organised by the industry, for the industry. As the official trade body, we can best represent the issues that are critical to our members and all the proceeds will go back into the industry".

Speakers included 'Screen Digest's Ben Keen, BT Openworld's Stephen Gordon and Itzik BenBassat from Exent Technologies and there was a panel session devoted to 'Overcoming Piracy'. But the final, and most authoritative word, was given to Microsoft's Sandy Duncan, who urged a note of caution. While the majority of speakers were optimistic to the point of overconfidence, discussing an area in which concrete evidence is hard to come by, Duncan reiterated Microsoft's long-term commitment to the sector, arguing that it's unlikely to be a source of short-term gain. He also pointed to the uncertainties regarding the value chain at the heart of digital distribution, and the technical difficulties, particularly in Europe, presented by widely differing technical standards.

And though he was careful to assert that his views were not necessarily those of Microsoft, he did perhaps sum up Microsoft's philosophy with regard to Xbox Live and online gaming by declaring that either online gaming will turn out to be bigger than TV, or it won't be worth pursuing.





The most interesting speaker at ELSPA's digital distribution seminar was Microsoft's Sandy Duncan, who sounded a note of caution

Recently Reviewed

Edge brings you a rundown of last issue's review scores

Title	Platform	Publisher	Developer	Score
Animal Crossing	GC	Nintendo	In-house	8
Colin McRae Rally 3	PS2/Xbox	Codemasters	In-house	8
Street Fighter Zero 3 Upper	GBA	Capcom	Crawfish	8
Super Mario Advance 3: Yoshi's Island	GBA	Nintendo	In-house	8
Unreal Tournament 2003	PC	Infogrames	Epic/Digital Extremes	8
Rally Fusion: Race of Champions	PS2/Xbox/GC	Activision	Climax Motorsports	7
Ratchet & Clank	PS2	SCEE	Insomniac Games	7
SOCOM: US Navy SEALs	PS2	SCEA	Zipper Interactive	7
The Lord of the Rings, The Two Towers	PS2/Xbox	Electronic Arts	In-house	7
World Rally Championship II Extreme	PS2	SCEE	Evolution Studios	7
Dead to Rights	Xbox	Namco	In-house (Namco Hometek)	6
Red Faction II	PS2	THQ	Volition	6
Star Fox Adventures	GC	Nintendo	Rare	6
Blinx: The Time Sweeper	Xbox	Microsoft	Artoon	5



Animal Crossing



Street Fighter Zero 3 Upper



Colin McRae Rally 3



SMA3: Yoshi's Island

CUTTINGS



Edge is hiring

Edge is looking for a talented writer to join its team of experienced videogame journalists in Bath. The successful candidate will be expected to demonstrate the ability to write scintillating copy to a high standard for every part of the magazine, from Front End to Testscreen.

If you have an in-depth knowledge and passion for gaming, an appetite for learning, and an ability to work within a fast-moving environment under pressure, then you could be the right person for the position. Some experience and strong industry contacts would be a bonus, but enthusiasm, drive and commitment are essential.

Applicants should send samples of their work (including a 500-word critique of **Edge**), along with a full CV and covering letter, quoting REF 627, to:
Human Resources Department, Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath, BA1 2BW
Email: recruit@futurenet.co.uk

Sky launches iTV game controller

Frustrated interactive TV gamers are set to give their high scores a boost with the arrival of Sky's new Gamepad controller. The device allows up to five players to participate at a time, and is designed specifically for gaming. The company's Gamestar portal will also introduce several new games, including *Bust a Move*, *Pong*, *Asteroids* and *Space Invaders*. For more information about the Gamepad, contact Sky Buy on 0870 555 1111.

Sony demonstrates commercial use for PS2

Sony unveiled a new facet of PlayStation2's increasingly wide technological remit at the Sony Business Solution trade fair, which took place in Tokyo last month. Sony appears to want to provide business users with a commercial tool for presenting visual information in stores and other public places. The demo consisted of a photographic image being manipulated through 360 degrees using the PlayStation2 controller via the company's 'FourthVIEW' technology, and it has been mooted for use in museums and the like.

www.kynogon.com

RenderWare gains a brain

The artificial intelligence gap in Criterion's RenderWare platform is now filled thanks to French vendor Kynogon

The science bit

Something that impressed Criterion about Kynogon was the robustness of its tools. One, in particular, automatically calculates the mesh of waypoints for a level – waypoints are the means by which entities work out how to move. Usually, these have to be placed individually by artists; a process which can take weeks to complete.

Kynogon's approach works by simply by dropping a number of game entities into a level and letting them explore it almost randomly. Once the whole level is explored, the dense mesh can be reduced down to a minimum set of waypoints and saved into a database. Developers can also manually place or remove waypoints as they wish. A different mesh can be generated for each entity in the game; for example a flying entity will be able to access areas a crawling entity won't be able to reach.

Another novel issue is the way Kynogon deals with pathfinding. It has an internal engine, which deals with the movement of game entities in basic terms of speed and orientation. These can be mapped into the movement form of any other game engine, whether it be a forward, back and strafe firstperson engine or a momentum-based vehicle model. "The AI engine is like a fly-by-wire approach in that it doesn't matter what it's linking to, it just provides a stream of commands such as go forward, turn 90 degrees," says Adam Billyard. "It's a really cute take."

There may be plenty of artificial intelligence engines available for developers, but only one has hit the jackpot of being chosen as the best-of-breed solution and integrated into Criterion's RenderWare platform. "One of the key things that sold the technology to me was that Kynogon has already got an implementation running well on PlayStation2," says Criterion's chief technology officer **Adam Billyard**. "There is so much technology that only runs on PC."

Of course, you're forgiven for thinking, "Kynogon who?" Despite higher profile competition, the tiny Paris-based company is now ahead of the game thanks to the exclusive distribution deal signed with Criterion. This means its technology will be sold by Criterion alongside other components such as MathEngine's Karma physics and Hybrid's visual optimiser within the RenderWare suite of tools.

"We have three clients in France but haven't been able to expand because of our size," explains marketing director and co-founder **Jacques Gaubil**, of Kynogon's achievements to date. Set up in 2000, the first title to ship using its technology is Microids' PlayStation2 game *Ben Hur*. "We were working to get the AI right for one track but two days before E3, Microids said, 'We want ten tracks in our demo.' We managed to get them all working. They were very happy," recalls Gaubil, of one incident during the six-month process in which Kynogon worked with Microids.

This demonstrates one of the problems developers have experienced when using an artificial intelligence engine, however. To get good results, the creators of the technology have to work closely with licensees. It's an uneconomic situation for both parties. Billyard refers to it as "shipping an engineer with every box." And with over 250 studios using RenderWare worldwide, it's not a model Criterion is about to get involved in.



Using the *Half-Life* engine, Kynogon demonstrates its bodyguard behaviour with the three Boba Fetts guarding Yoda. The technology can be quickly integrated into any game engine

Flexible friend

For this reason the past couple of months has seen Kynogon ensuring its technology is open and accessible to developers' needs. "If they want to use our solution out of the box they can, but they can also modify what we have done, or completely replace elements," Gaubil explains. "We don't ask developers to change anything in their design. Any game engine can be plugged into our solution," adds **Pierre Pontevia**, Kynogon's co-founder and president. "It now takes just half a day to integrate into any game engine."

There are four hierarchical components in Kynogon's technology. The highest level ensures developers can customise the technology, while maintaining a high level of performance. Next are services, which are the algorithms that define the core AI, such as pathfinding. These are processor intensive and so are split over rendering frames, something known as time slicing. The third level are agents, which are specific behaviours such as hide, flee or fight. These call on services; for example, both hide and flee agents would require pathfinding calculations. The final layer is the decision layer, which determines which agent action is triggered. These can be hardwired into the entities – an 'aggressive' bot will always fight, while an injured 'default' bot might hide – or can be controlled by scripts written by the developer.

It all adds up to a highly complex package, which, even now, will take time for developers to get the most from. "Our initial offering is definitely a low-level, meat 'n' potatoes approach," Billyard confesses. "But it will allow developers to add interesting and believable behaviours quickly into their games, while demonstrating the potential for AI for future projects."







This demo (above left) shows the behaviour of 150 spiders, each of which is handled as an independent entity not by a flocking algorithm, as is often the case in game AI. The first game to use Kynogon's AI package is Microids' *Ben Hur* (above centre) which has racing and combat elements

www.darkbasicpro.com

Turbocharged BASIC targets games

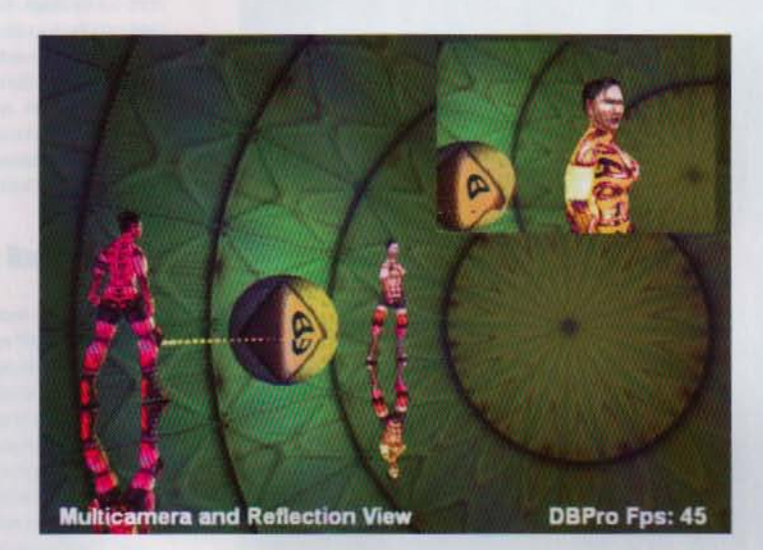
DarkBASIC Pro gives everyone's first programming language a massive make-over and speed boost

The elitism of programming has been an issue for certain enthusiasts for a number of years. They point back to a time when rudimentary coding was required to get a home computer to do anything useful and languages such as Beginner's All-purpose Symbolic Instruction Code (BASIC) offered low barriers of entry for the curious.

Projects such as Sony's YABASIC for PlayStation2 and various other languages have attempted to fill the gap created by the rise of C++ and hardwired game consoles. One such effort has been DarkBASIC; an entry-level PC package for 2D and 3D game programming. Despite sharing a name with previous versions, however, the latest release, which boasts the additional tag Professional, promises to balance ease of use with vastly increased performance.

"Some people thought we had slapped some more commands into it, whereas, in fact, it's been rewritten from scratch," explains DarkBASIC's MD and creator **Lee Bamber**, who cut his teeth on the AMOS programming language for the Amiga. The main difference is that previous versions of DarkBASIC were interpreted, meaning each individual programme statement was translated and run in sequence, making it much slower than one compiled straight into machine code. "I spent a year working on the compiler," says Bamber. "When a language is interpreted, the meat – the DO loops, IF statements, the variables – cause slowdown. Now all of those are dealt with using machine code. It's made a huge difference to the performance."

The other half of DarkBASIC Pro's guts are the 35 dynamically linked libraries (DLLs), which are small machine-coded functions that can be used by programmes. Bamber has also written a software development kit allowing users to plug their own DLLs into DarkBASIC Pro so they can control devices such as custom peripherals.



Direct marketing

A big shift enabled by this wholescale change is support for Microsoft's programming interface, DirectX 8.1. This means DarkBASIC Pro opens up cutting-edge hardware features such as vertex shaders to coders who require only a couple of lines of code to get them working. And it's not just graphics. Through DirectX, DarkBASIC handles important game technologies such as multiplayer, sound and force feedback devices as well.

Another introduction that hardcore programmers will enjoy is that of a binary space partition (BSP) engine, a technique commonly used in firstperson games such as *Quake* and *Unreal*. "People were trying to write their own but they tended to be slow because they're hard to optimise. So we wrote one," Bamber explains, adding, "If there are features users want to include, we try hard to give them what they want."

A similar example is the 'set camera to follow' command. As it sounds, this is used to set a camera to follow an object. "It was horrible to write. I had to do it three times," Bamber confesses. "Originally I wrote it without any collision detection because I assumed people would write their own routines." But it didn't take too much thought to realise if they didn't, they wouldn't use the command at all. So his next task was the automatic collision command which can be tagged to any object, stopping it moving through any solid object.

Overall, the result is a product Bamber says anyone can use. Perhaps more interesting though, is its potential higher up the programming foodchain; for example in terms of prototyping ideas in professional studios. "You will always create a faster programme writing in C++," Bamber concedes. "The question is how much time do you have to spend to gain that edge?" Subtext; you'll certainly be hard pressed to get anything faster and simpler than DarkBASIC Pro.





One big addition to DarkBASIC Pro is realtime volumeric shadows which can be attached to any object although there are some more optimisations to be carried out on the routine (above left)



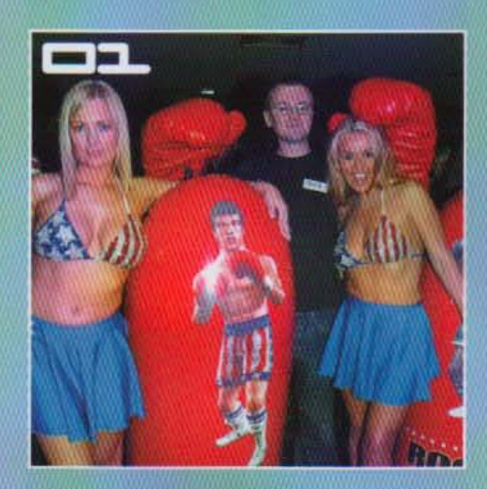


Using just a few lines of DarkBASIC Pro code enables coders to use the vertex shader instructions of DirectX. This example (top) shows a cartoon-style rendering and sphere mapped texturing. Super reflective metallic surfaces can be generated using the sphere mapping command (above)

Hitched to the DirectX wagon

Although there are obvious advantages to using DirectX's functionality – after all it is the blueprint graphic cards manufacturers use for their new hardware – it does occasionally cause confusion. "We had these people on our forums complaining that DarkBASIC Pro only supported eight dynamic lights," Bambers laughs. "I was like, 'I can't invent hardware for you. DirectX only supports eight realtime lights.'" But more serious is the sometimes fickle nature of the DirectX team's approach. "The latest version of DirectX deals with 2D graphics via 3D, which is how we deal with it too," Bamber explains. "It's strange, because one of the biggest criticisms of DarkBASIC was the slowness of our 2D but now no programming language will be as fast as our 2D because we're doing it on the graphics card." The problem, however, are the rumours that DirectX 10 might bring back a pure 2D implementation. Not due for a couple of years, this could trigger another major rewrite for Bamber and his DarkBASIC team.

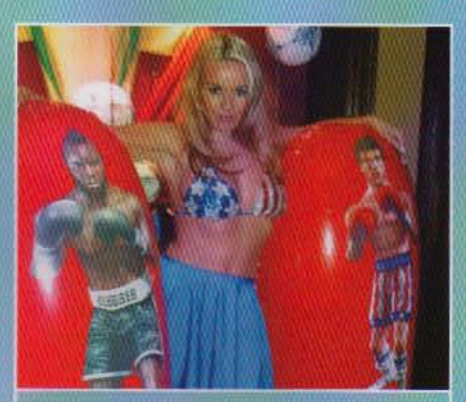
OUT THERE
REPORTAGE





"This level select screen is excellent! Perhaps games aren't for loners and losers after all!"





Each lucky partygoer left the bash with a gift bag featuring an inflatable plastic model, pictured above





"Why are all your games on the wall, dear?" "It's art, sweetie." "Be quiet and put them away." "Okay."

01 Seconds out, round in

UK: Impressive amounts of alcohol, women in sparkly bikinis faking like they care, and brutal, bruising violence. Just another night out for **Edge**, then, but that didn't make Rage's shindig to celebrate the success of its multiformat slugger *Rocky* any less entertaining. The centrepiece of the event, which took place in the upper bar at The Sports Cafe in Picadilly Circus, was a party-wide *Rocky* tournament. And, appropriately enough, it turned out to be a real-life story of local-boy-turned hero, with occasional **Edge** freelancer Jon Attaway walking away with the top prize, a boxing glove signed by Clubber Lang himself, Mr T.

02 Pinball wizard

UK: "Fed up with finding your favourite CDs lying around and getting scratched?" asks Discarray, in a tone those addicted to infomercials on late night cable might recognise. "Too lazy to find the correct case to return your disks to? Well discarray.com have come up with the answer!" An answer, anyway: create a piece of Functional Art from your game collection, and mount the discs on a Discarray storage unit. The units, which come in a range of colours, display the front-side of the disc on a pretty pinboard, so gorgeous CDs are essential. "My ultimate goal," says Discarray's owner, Justin Kyriakides, "is for it to be as famous a product as the Filofax was." Discarrays start at £25 and can be ordered online from www.discarray.com, or by telephoning 020 8886 6933. **Edge** wants a Spectrum compatible version.

Soundbytes

"These might be the haystack that this twisted needle could be in,"

Jack Thompson, a lawyer who specialises in linking videogames to gun crime, gives his verdict on the Washington sniper.

"Jimmy said, "I can't wait for 'Car Stealers', 'Torture in Iraq' and 'Blowing Up Public Schools.'"

Post-sniper analysis gives the 'Washington Post' a chance to run a painfully-written allegory blaming videogames for, well, everything.

"Nintendo accepts the finding that, up to 1998, its distribution practices did not comply with EU competition rules… However, in view of the size of the fine, which Nintendo finds surprising, Nintendo will lodge an appeal."

Nintendo reacts to a €149m (£94.6m) fine imposed on them by the European Commission for price fixing.

"To charge a nation of 200 million people worldwide as followers of an injurious cult leader is an unacceptable practice and factually incorrect."

A Sikh coalition reacts to one of *Hitman 2*'s levels, which portrays a Sikh and Dalit sect as terrorists and features a shoot-out in a sacred Gurdwara.

03 Journos in bobblehead frenzy

UK: It happens the same way every year. Clocks go back, lights go up on Oxford Street, Pizza Hut rings out to Band Aid's 'Feed The World', and someone, somewhere wins the distribution contract in the lucrative Nintendo Bobblehead market. This year honours go to Bigben Interactive, whose seven-inch tall spring-headed models of Mario, Luigi, Yoshi and Bowser should be in stores now, at just under £10 each. "Even here in the office everyone wants one," says Accessories Division marketing manager **Caroline Denham**. "And our only concern is whether we will be able to satisfy the hordes of journos who will be demanding freebies. They are that cool." Thanks for looking out for us, Caroline. I mean, do you have any idea what you can get for one of those in the crack dens of Bath?

04 Toypad animal attraction

Japan: Perhaps one of the most marketable games currently available, it's not really a surprise that *Animal Crossing* is getting Takara's Very Important Franchise treatment. The keyrings are a perfect substitute for that ageing Digimon fob, and **Edge** is sure it'd sleep easier with one of the eight plush animals, which include arch-capitalist Tom Nook and, well, a seasonal spoiler. But **Edge**'s most-most wanted are the tiny, inch-high plastic characters, now in their second series. Each figure comes with its own house, furniture, and household accessories. Sylvanian Families were *never* as cool as this. More pictures at US online store ufocatcher: http://ufocatcher.net/ufoplush/animalcrossing/animalchoice.html

05 Fag burns not included

US: Arcade sticks have never been the most elegant of peripherals, mostly too lightweight and plastic to recreate the flea-pit feeling retrogamers crave. Not so Xgaming Inc's X-Arcade stick, which offers two sticks and 20 buttons all attached to a wonderfully solid wooden panel. But the real beauty of the X-Arcade stick is that it's compatible cross system (hence the 'X', **Edge** presumes) – adaptors are available to convert it effortlessly for use with your Dreamcast, GameCube, PS2, Xbox, PC or even your Apple Mac. Updates for future hardware releases are promised, and the deck even comes with pinball-style buttons on the each side, perfect for *Visual Pinball* fans. At $200 (£126) it's a luxury, but it's hard wearing and sturdy – hell, you could almost call it an investment, though **Edge** won't accept responsibility for what happens why you try that on with your significant other. More information is available at www.x-arcade.com/

Data Stream

Gun deaths in US in 1999, per 100,000 population: **10.58**
Gun deaths in England/Wales in 1999, per 100,000 population: **0.36**
Approximate number of licensed firearms in the US in 1999, per 100,000 population: **23,897**
Approximate number of licensed firearms in the UK in 1999, per 100,000 population: **498**
Videogame sales in US in 1999, per person: **0.7904**
Videogame sales in UK in 1999, per person: **0.5882**
Lawyer Jack Thompson's carefully considered sniper suspect profile: **"A teenaged boy, who plays videogames"**



What's that Mario? You want me to kill? You're nodding. You want me to kill again, don't you?





But the mess last time! And the sirens! And you're still both nodding! Okay, where's that hammer...





Mr. Resetti, the mole who pops up when you reset without saving. At least **Edge** *presumes* that's him...


The X-Arcade stick. Okay, so it's not *Tekki*, but have you ever tried Dragon Punching with a gearstick?


A stick so versatile it's possible to play *Pac-Man* on a flatscreen monitor. On a flatscreen monitor!



Sosaria, viewed through 2002-tinted glasses. Ah, memories. **Edge** remembers when all this was fields



Ah, the beauty of full 3D. It's just like *Ultima IX*, only it doesn't go from dusk to sunset to blue screen



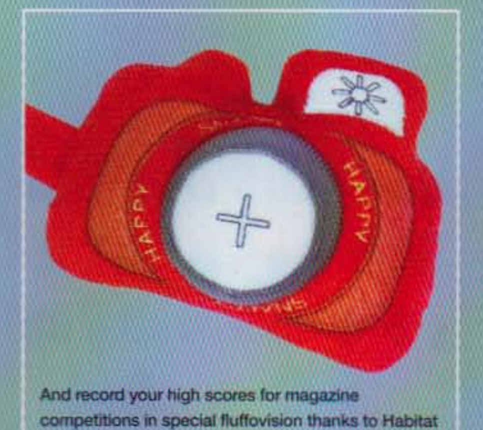
The current demo runs under Linux, which will doubtless please hardcore PC types no end



If only this had been available when **Edge** was little. We learned how to play videogames the hard way



Not likely to support Dolby technology, but nevertheless a sound investment for youngsters



And record your high scores for magazine competitions in special fluffovision thanks to Habitat



One of the best steering wheels on the market or the most elaborate novelty clock ever conceived?



Free booze at Joytech's wheel launch was a boon for journos, but it didn't help the presentation much

06 Ultima underground

Denmark: Peroxide, a freeware collective of coders and artists, is reviving a world first visited by Richard Garriot over 20 years ago. Gamers first saw *Ultima I*'s Sosaria – before it became Britannia, and before the franchise disintegrated into a mess of complexity and, ultimately, game-destroying bugs – from a rudimentary top-down perspective. Now it's a little more glorious, the firstperson view showing fields and sunsets appropriate to the 21st century and a pre-Avatar idyll. Ambitious Peroxide aims to flesh out the plot a little, as well as including a proper *Ultima*-style spellcasting system and over 50 types of enemies. **Edge** hopes the non-commercial aspect of the project saves it from EA's notoriously litiginous lawyers. "Can I bake bread?" asks the FAQ. "Would it be an *Ultima* if you couldn't?" concludes Peroxide. For more information visit http://www.peroxide.dk/ultima/

07 My first controller

UK: Retail chain Habitat has hatched a devious plan to get a new generation of gamers used to holding a videogame controller in their hands. Except in this case, the controller in question is a plush toy. Press the buttons, though, and you'll be treated to the sort of digital noodling that will be familiar to retrogamers all over the world. It costs £6 and is available from all major Habitat stores as part of the Gismo range, which also includes a set of cuddly headphones and soft toy camera. But it's the controller that **Edge** will be getting for Christmas.

08 Wheelie wheelie good

UK: Apologies for the header but it's completely in keeping with Joytech's sales pitch for its new Williams F1 steering wheel, which was admirably demonstrated to **Edge** by the company's ebullient PR manager, Alex Verrey aka Big Boy Barry. "It's the only wheel of its type with fully adjustable leg braces," burbled the former 'TIGS' presenter. Shame there's no drinks holder.

Based on Juan Pablo Montoya's own wheel, it's a sturdy and responsive piece of kit. But what particularly caught our attention is that the wheel is completely detachable from its frame, thus providing a fetching desk clock. At £40 the wheel is easily the best in its price range. And as for that box quote, Alex? "It's a clock!?"

Continue

Treasure
It dares to update the mighty *Gradius* franchise
Vin Diesel
For using Hollywood bucks to startup a softco.
Nintendo
For finally providing gold disk-playing NR Reader hardware

Quit

Nintendo
For taking six months to provide NR Reader hardware
US attack on videogames
Because tackling the real issue is clearly too difficult
Leaked *Doom III* code
You can *really* forget about a prescreen now



09 Dark Fiber

Despite the importance of European players in the development of the Internet, notably Tim Berners-Lee and CERN, its history has been often hijacked by Americans. If 'Dark Fiber: Tracking Critical Internet Culture' serves only one purpose, the revaluation of this parochial attitude would be welcome.

Named after a definition for unused fibre-optic cable, **Geert Lovink**'s book is a crystallisation of already existing online content. Indeed as the author points out, there is a certain irony that this material being collected together in book form at all. As he duly points out; "The book is no longer the dominant storage medium of knowledge." What books have yet to be bettered at, however, is concentrating large amounts of information in a logical sequence, and Lovink certainly packs a lot in.

Starting with Amsterdam Digital City, of which Lovink was a founder in 1993, he takes a highly analytical view on the collision between nascent net values and the growing influence of state and business. Amsterdam Digital City is now just a commercial broadband service provider, for example. Other subjects covered include moderation of mailing list communities, attempts to establish a new global Internet time standard and travelogues on the events such as the 1999 earthquake in Taiwan.

But most interesting is the way the book is punctuated by Lovink's continual battle with the views of 'Wired' magazine's digirati. Claiming it cuts all ties to European ways of thinking, thus limiting itself to 'how-to' management sales talk, the ferocity of his attacks are a sharp remainder of the gulf that exists between US culture and that of our continental neighbours, even in cyberspace.

10 1000 Game Heroes

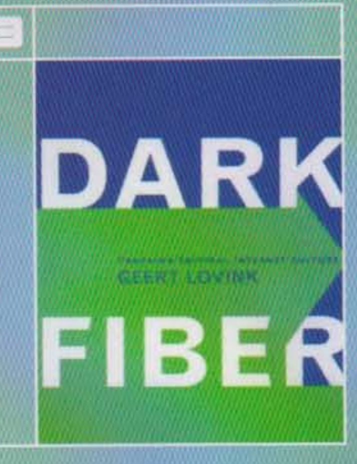
A book about gaming heroes must be treated with some caution. While Lara's face appearing on 'The Face' was a indication of how far videogames have come over the last ten years, it inspired not a few lazy publications that might as well have had 'cash-in' stamped on the cover sleeve.

Thankfully, Taschen's book succeeds because it is absolutely beautiful (though, admittedly, beautiful more in presentation than content). Many chapters are introduced by luminaries such as David Cage, Bill Roper, Peter Molyneux and Frédérick Raynal, and though there's not a great insight into how their character's came into existence, such voices add a weight to the glorious imagery.

Ten sections sort the plethora of gaming characters developed since the '70s into a loose themed order with later chapters covering magical, sexy, strange, fighting and funny heroes. A handy index that sorts each character by game and platform allows you to effortlessly find your favourites.

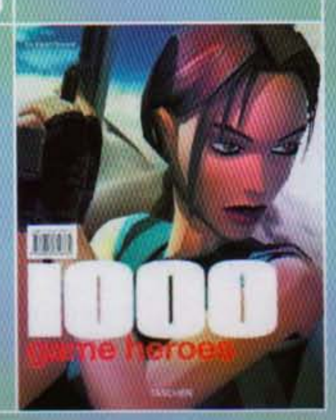
It's the sort of book that you'd be delighted with on Christmas morning then would happily take down from the shelf from time to time to remind yourself how vibrant videogames can be. The shallow and predictable commentary is less welcome. A good attempt, but a definitive game characters book, with contextual, social and historical analysis has yet to be written.

09



Author: **Geert Lovink**
Publisher: **MIT Press**
ISBN: **0 262 12249 9**

10



Author: **David Choquet (ed)**
Publisher: **Taschen**
ISBN: **38228 16337**

11



Site: **Eric Myer's Stereotypes**
URL: **http://www.ericmyer.com/stereotypes.htm**

11 Website of the month

Eric Myer is a photographer. This, part of his online portfolio, consists of black and white head-and-shoulders shots of 20 people. The pictures cut a cross-section of humanity you might catch on an imaginary cosmopolitan high street – all ages, all races – and are stark and beautiful, but the magic lies is in the digital treatment. Each photo splits down an invisible horizontal line through the middle of the face, and the top half of one image can be seamlessly blended with the bottom of another. Result? Playschool photographic genetic splicing. Not really videogame related, sure, but a beautiful piece of Web junk regardless.

12 Advertainment

Japan: Want to be a morally corrupt, ethically challenged, money-grabbing, lying bastard without having to go through the hassle of reading law at university? Then Capcom's highly popular comedic solicitor 'sim', *Gyakuten Saiban 2*, is the game for you.





"Don't you think it scandalous to make fun of the courthouse which is a very serious matter?"




"Objection!" intervenes an Ally McBeal type. "Why not, if *it is* fun?"




"Make a game in which you have to prove your client innocent? I can't believe it." "Objection!" Ally shouts.




"Again, why not if *it is* fun?" she insists, much to the dismay of the (rather easily outwitted) prosecutor.




The crowd, agitated by such a bulletproof argument, is quickly brought back to order by the wise judge.





Voiceover: "One objective, one truth – get the proof you need to defend your client. *Gyakuten Saiban 2*!"




"Yes, this is fun," proclaims the judge. Smiles, as Ally's child-like linear defence wins her another case.



REDEYE

A sideways look at the videogame industry

Xbox Live: unforgettable, unfortunately

The problem with drinking to forget is that when you wake up you remember. (Well, actually, if you've been drinking before the thing you want to forget, then you keep drinking afterwards, it's possible you'll forget it all. But RedEye wouldn't recommend it.) (Particularly in charge of a videogame motorcycle.) (Regardless, it didn't work.) The problem with drinking to forget is that the next morning everything reappears in horrific, single-beat flashbacks. A teenage girl whispers in RedEye's ear. The motorbike veers sharply to the left. Urrrgh.

Xbox Live is live, at least for the privileged few beta testers who have splurged their illiterate logins all over Microsoft's pristine servers. The kit consists of a hideous orange memory card which houses your login details, a lightweight headset which all bar those born to do telesales will find initially confusing, and a CD containing trial versions of *Whacked!* and *MotoGP*. Accompanying it are a sheaf of notes explaining how to connect your box to the Internet and what to do when things go wrong. It does not contain a guide to online etiquette, which could have been the problem.

Of course, online anthropology is probably second nature to Microsoft given its background. RedEye is not much of a PC gamer – life's too short for the aggravation – but he has tried to play *Counter-Strike*, and it is difficult to involve yourself in a community so intent on keeping outsiders outside. The online gaming community is notoriously intolerant of the initially incompetent. With this in mind, RedEye makes a pact with himself to try harder this time. To play nicely.

Now, it transpires that Xbox Live lets you mask your voice. There are several different filters available, including 'Dark Lord', 'Robot', 'Big Man' and, oh, joy of joys, 'Teenage Girl'. In theory this means people won't be afraid of letting others hear their voice, since it won't be their voice – it will remove a psychological barrier that prevents many from talking to strangers. In practice, it will mean a thousand teenage boys all pretending to be teenage girls hitting on a thousand teenage robots who are really another thousand teenage boys. The real-life girls? They're all Big Men, naturally.

For now, RedEye sticks with his own voice. Here is a transcript of his first conversation in a *MotoGP* lobby, in full:

"'Sup?"
"'Sup."
"'Sup."
"'Sup."
"'Sup."

And so on, in robotic Californian accents, until RedEye flicks on the green talk light, and goes for it.

"Uhm," tentatively, "... 'sup?"

There is a pause, a hiss of pensive static.

"Whoah. Who's the English guy?"

"Whoah. Heyhey. Looks like we got ourselves a regular Hugh Grant!"

And so on, and okay. So RedEye suddenly understands the point of voice masking, and logs off, and on again as a Teenage Girl. Because if you can't beat them...

"Hello boys..."

The thing is, it doesn't quite sit well with RedEye. Perhaps it's the voice testing part that's really disconcerting. "Hello, RedEye," says RedEye in his own voice, then hears it echo back through the headphones a few seconds later in something close to a narcissist's dream. RedEye is a narcissist of some repute, naturally, so he spends a few moments talking to himself. "You know, I've always found you attractive, RedEye. How about a drink?" And how could RedEye possibly refuse?

The vodka makes things sit better. It's worth mentioning at this point how absolutely unforgettable *MotoGP* is online. The thing about racing human opponents is that, regardless of where you are in the field, you always care. If you are playing offline, it is difficult to resist restarting when you're 14th in a group of 16. Online, you loathe the person in front and the person behind equally; they are your mortal enemies, and 13th may as well be first and 15th is just about last. You want one, fear the other, can't stop playing and gloating and listening to robot voices curse your genius.

But anyway, back to being a teenage girl. This time on *Whacked!*, with more vodka, but still not enough to make it resemble anything approaching an acceptable game. In *Whacked!* you play one of several super-crazy characters with super-crazy weapons in super-crazy levels. The action, such as it is, is viewed from thirdperson, as the character runs around trying to hit the other players. That is it, all, everything. Although it tries very, very hard to be super-crazy, *Whacked!* is furiously mundane.

"So, hey, you pretty things." RedEye is really getting into the online persona here, "What do you think of the game?"

"It's an okay game," asserts one player, wildly swing a baseball bat at RedEye's rabbit avatar and missing, his monotone voice betraying exactly how exciting *Whacked!* gets.

"Yes, it's quite good I guess," adds his comrade, hypnotised by routine.

"Hmm, okay." RedEye's voice filter masks his disgust, and he makes for *MotoGP* again. "See you later, honeyz."

Then memories become a little more fractured, as the alcohol takes hold. Everything from this point is synaptic reconstruction. RedEye joins a group of 15 other *MotoGP* racers. All of them are playing in Stunt mode, where points are gained for knocking other players down and completing sections of the course cleanly. It is a mostly friendly affair, since the accidental first-corner takedowns that inevitably happen in straight racing are now part of the game. And thus, in all the excitement and grease and the rough and tumble, RedEye embarks upon his first bit of girly online trash talking.

"The thing about racing human opponents is that you always care. You loathe the person in front and the person behind equally"

"You guys are better than my last boyfriend, he *never* let me come first."

"Oooh, baby, looks like you need stablisers."

"Kiss chase sucks, you never get caught. Maybe I'll go play with some real men."

And some special Americana-inspired cheers: "Num-ber one! Quick and mean! Su-per Red-Eye's your Prom Queen!"

It is only later, when it transpires the voice mask is not switched on at all, that the drinking starts in earnest. Online gaming can produce unforgettable moments, but oh, to forget.

RedEye is a veteran videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with ***Edge's***

A poet once wrote of "the fascination of what's difficult," and there is doubtless a similar attraction in wrestling with a videogame. One of the medium's core satisfactions is that of interacting with a complex, dynamic system whose various interdependencies can be manipulated by a skilful player. But is more complexity always good?

It's true that we need a minimum level of complexity in any game for it to be interesting. Noughts and crosses quickly becomes boring because it is combinatorially trivial – you can see all the possible games quite quickly. Move up an order of complexity to something like Connect 4 and you have a very entertaining, playable game (even though it has been officially 'solved' by brute-force computing). Add another order of magnitude to arrive at something like Othello and we begin to talk of deep strategy, in a game which still only has a handful of very simple rules.

rudely circumscribed; nonetheless, *Conflict: Desert Storm* is terrifically enjoyable.

It has, for one thing, possibly the best console implementation of a sniper rifle since *GoldenEye*. It gives a strong illusion of tactical freedom: you want me to sneak into that hangar and plant C4 on the MiG when it's crawling with enemies? Sod it, you open the hangar door and I'll just fire a rocket in there. The fact that its soldiers tend to walk in a somewhat constipated half-stoop, and sometimes have trouble following a straight line, can be forgiven. My friend and I spent many happy hours scoping out the terrain, dreaming up strategies, and shouting abuse at each other – "Okay, you snipe from up here and cover me while I run across the bridge to plant the explosives." "Where's your guy? You've lost him, haven't you?" "That's me you're shooting!"

The fact that the command system is so manageably limited could be argued to be a virtuous

complexity is much easier to advertise. If a developer can point to a wide range of commands and actions and call them 'features', that is much more understandable to a publishing suit than some vague hand-waving about how the game is, like, really complex and satisfying once you get into it.

One game that does revel in surface complexity is *Deus Ex*, with its bewildering array of biomods and skill enhancements, which are the game's primary selling point. But these are arguably not essential. What makes the game so compelling is its illusion of absolute freedom to tackle situations in the way you choose. Of course, if you choose to specialise in lockpicking then you'll need fewer lockpicks to open a given door, but when playing through the game again recently on PS2 I couldn't be bothered to experiment with different upgrades and replay levels to see what effect they'd have. The game is already sufficiently long and rich in tactical incident.



TRIGGER HAPPY

Steven Poole

Surface complexity versus deep complexity

This last example reminds us that there are two different attributes we might call 'complexity'. There is, firstly, a sheer numerical quantity of options or commands, as with a board game that is festooned with different cards and counters, or the kind of strategy videogame that boasts of its enormous variety of resource types, material, etc. Let's call this surface complexity. Secondly, there is the complexity that arises from a perceived depth of possible tactics or strategies, which can emerge from a very simple set of initial rules. Call that deep complexity.

Robotron 2084 has a simple design, combining eight-way movement and eight-way firing with varying enemy behaviour. But **Eugene Jarvis** remarked on the emergent deep complexity of his masterwork when he recalled watching someone play it, "He was using tactics I never imagined, strategies I didn't think possible." And the western paradigm of the complex game is still chess, which has a small set of simple rules but limitless tactical possibilities. (Japanese Go is even more complex.)

My most surprising recent gaming experience was a hugely entertaining evening playing *Conflict: Desert Storm* on Xbox in cooperative mode. Now any aficionado of the numerous classy squad-based combat games developed on PC is likely to look down his nose at what he perceives as a travesty of his genre. The surface complexity which usually characterises the tactical squad shooter has been

simplification, given that the player also has to worry about who has the right weapons to do the job, where the sheikh is, which office block conceals an enemy sniper, and whether you have time to deliver a medipack to your loveable cockney SAS comrade, groaning somewhere in an alleyway. Now, I am not arguing that surface complexity and depth

complexity cannot coexist: clearly, they can. But in a context of sociable action gaming, any more surface complexity than *Conflict: Desert Storm* has already would act as an obstacle to immersion. If we'd each had to read a manual and memorise 30 different key commands, we would have given up after half an hour. The extra tactical depth that such an increase in surface complexity might have afforded simply would not have been worth the price of entry.

Note that this isn't at its core a PC-versus-console argument. There are console games with surface complexity but little depth – such as *Ratchet & Clank*, with its impressively large variety of gadgets and weapons, but insufficient freedom to use them in creative ways. And there are PC games, such as *Serious Sam* or *Gridrunner++*, which offer rich experiences through the interaction of relatively simple components. What is obvious, is that surface

Developers are deciding that less is more. *Advance Wars* offers turn-based strategy gaming stripped of irrelevant surface complexity. While *Quantum Redshift*'s limited weaponry makes races more tactical, as you decide whether it's worth falling back in order to use the homing missile on the guy who's on your tail. And we all know the kind of mind-

"Just when you're thinking that simplicity is the new complexity, along comes Steel Battalion, with its twin-stick, three-pedal, 40-button controller"

bendingly complex gameplay offered by the one-handed torture device that is *Super Monkey Ball*.

But just when you are thinking that simplicity is the new complexity, along comes *Steel Battalion*, with its twin-stick, three-pedal, 40-button controller. Cunningly, while revelling in the complexity of its control system, the game offers compellingly direct point 'n' shoot gameplay. The four brushed-steel switches that initialise your mech's systems will never be used in the rest of that session, but it sure feels good to flick them. This is surface complexity engineered as the glamour of competence, and its over-the-top grandeur makes you hope that arbitrary complexity never quite goes away.

Steven Poole is the author of 'Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames' (Fourth Estate). Email: trighap@hotmail.com





AV OUT

Toshihiro Nagoshi, president, Amusement Vision

Stimulation: Nagoshi-san gets touchy-feely

The other day, I had an argument with a fellow creator. It began quite casually. The theme of the conversation was "What will be essential for games in the near future?" The creator's response was, "Simple. Stimulation. This will be necessary from now on." I didn't understand what he meant so I asked him for some examples. He started to list some basic themes, such as horror, violence, love and so on, but while he was making his point, I stopped him. "What about speed, the simple joy of accomplishment in clearing a quest?" I asked. "Do they not count as stimulation as well?" He replied in the negative, and I asked why.

His response was interesting. He replied that these were only simple tools to enhance the initial stimulation. A rush of speed or the thrill of accomplishment are just tools to further impress, for example, the horror of a situation. While I thought I understood his point, my mind was clearly not satisfied, and later I returned to the discussion...

"Don't you think that horror or violence could be seen as simple tools as well?" I asked, "Don't you think that what matters is after?"

"After? What are you talking about?" he replied.

"Well, for example, the message? Family, friendship, love or a prayer for peace."

And he laughed! "I explained to you. It is all about stimulation. There is no stimulation in love or prayer. Don't you agree?"

"No, no, no," I reacted, as strongly as he had to me. "What you're talking about is at least a way to accomplish something, isn't it? What I mean is..."

And it went on. The conversation was not very conclusive. Reaction to reaction, no end in sight – an argument. I felt I didn't express myself strongly enough, but he was very clear in what he thought.

Now that I'm thinking about it again, I can explain what I meant, say what I should have said before. It is not as simple as 'stimulation'. There are separate things: what you need in the game, what you want the player to feel, what message will be included. In each of those basic steps I wanted to locate the necessary elements, and work out the most effective way of making the entire process successful. I thought that was clear before, but I was angry too, and that clouded my thoughts, and so yes, I was partly responsible for what happened.

However, I've noticed that this notion of pure stimulation is becoming more common in the industry. There are more people around me talking about it, and those closest to me, my entourage, have also been discussing it. Personally, I think that the origin of the movement is *Grand Theft Auto III*, and the fact that sales for it have skyrocketed. The figures are indisputable, but I think it's wrong to think that, just because of that, we all need to adopt this trend. Popularity is not linked to that kind of stimulation; people are not buying it because there's horror or violence in the game. It's nonsense, and if we just imitate that, then I fear for the future of the games industry. We have to think carefully about our next step. If not, I don't see any real future for us.

The problem is that when a game is a hit, more titles like it will inevitably follow. There is not much we can do about that, because sales drive game development. But in a sense it's not all negative, because some of the games companies will focus on that successful genre and help it develop further. But in the case we're looking at, the point is quite different. I mean, here, if we take what people feel has sold *GTAIII* and develop games accordingly, then we're approving the development of violence into higher, even more obscene levels. I'd like to look at that in more detail, but first, let me explain to you what I think about *GTAIII*.

First, I was so very impressed by all the breakthrough features of the game, the courage of the developers, and their obvious technical ability. The main surprise for me was the 'break the rules' focus. It sounds like a simple concept, but the level of liberty included in the game hides an enormous technical achievement. And lots of work.

But still they did it. The game's framerate is not optimised and suffers in some parts of the game, but it's not something you would give any real attention to while you're playing. I was so impressed by the freedom. Playing it, you understand what they wanted to achieve: "To fulfil the objective, by any means possible". They wanted to create a world that allows that kind of freeform thinking, and to build that world they had to include this brutality, and put it in a positive light – to drive the player to think of new, violent ways of solving problems. Without this, the criminal focus would have not been possible.

To make a world where everything is possible to fulfil objectives, means you have to break the existing rules in games and deliver something new, which means more technical expertise and work. That was their concept, and they did it. In that way, I understand their reasons. Their objectives are understandable but, on a personal level, I'm not comfortable with the result. The content is too rough for me. Of course, it is just my own opinion.

Personally I can't make something thinking, "This is a game, so it's not real." I think that *because* games are not real you have to respect things. I keep this policy in all of my projects. Yes, games are fictions, but the industry is now so big and influences everyday life so much, touching users sensitive to a lot of things. That's the situation we're in. So I think you can't justify things by saying, "It's only a game."

And I wonder what *GTAIII* would have been like if the developers had a negative approach to violence. I believe we could have ended up with another great game, but maybe it wouldn't have sold as many copies, or made this instant stimulation factor, the trend the other creator was telling me about.

"I wonder what GTAIII would've been like if the developers had a negative approach to violence. Maybe it wouldn't have sold as many copies"

Gamers are sensitive to trends, for sure, but so are developers. "What kind of stimulation factor will we be able to enjoy next?" we ask. "What kind of stimulation factor will people want next?" Violence will satisfy right now.

But violence, or any other 'stimulation factor' won't make a game. That way of thinking is wrong, because games are more than just a list of factors; I believe they have infinite possibilities and can deliver a better experience for users. We need more feeling in games. Stimulation and feeling sound similar but they are very different. Stimulation is instant whereas feeling remains. I always take feeling into account, and stimulation is only a route to this. That's the way I chose as a creator, and I work extremely hard to make it possible. See you!

Toshihiro Nagoshi is president of Amusement Vision, formerly Sega subsidiary Soft R&D #4

A gigantic new store opened the other day in Tokyo's Akihabara district. Its name is Asobit City, and it's part of the Laox group. The store offers all kinds of entertainment products, including games for both PC and consoles, manga, anime, DVDs, toys and so on. It is really a true monument for those who are part of the Japanese 'otaku' culture. Maybe that could sound a little bit negative but, in a way, this is the first department store for the so-called otaku.

Anyway, I went along to the grand opening of this store – my colleagues and I had to cover it for the magazine you understand, although perhaps you might want to call us otaku too. Many events had been scheduled to mark this huge event, including a big game of something like bingo. Among the prizes there was some very appealing stuff; including game consoles. We didn't win anything, but the next day one of my colleagues

It's worth making clear at this point the state of Xbox sales in Japan. According to our sister magazine, 'Famitsu-Xbox', the console has sold 283,936 units (those figures were gathered between September 16, 2002 and October 13, 2002). The Xbox has been on the market for about six months, half a year, and it has failed to even cross the 300,000 units mark.

As far as the software is concerned, the best selling game in Japan is Tecmo's *Dead or Alive 3*. The official figure for this title is 166,067 copies sold. For the worldwide hit *Halo*, the game struggled to sell 67,948 copies – not particularly bad for a western firstperson shooter, but a disaster for a console's flagship title. That gives you some idea of the current plight of the Xbox in Japan.

So let's be honest, it's far from positive news for Microsoft's console – at least if you look at the figures alone, which show that the machine just isn't

You see, it seems to me that the Xbox is fast becoming the focal centre for hardcore gamers in Japan – I told you the audience was special. Now, I've played Sega's *Crazy Taxi 3* and Capcom's *Tekki*. Both games are immediately enjoyable and capture the player's attention when you experience them for the first time. This is a strictly personal impression, but the Japanese player is not someone who judges a game by its visuals, he is someone who experiences whole-heartedly, who invests something of himself into the experience. In my division at work, I am surrounded by numerous 'veteran' players, and the feeling is that they are bored with PlayStation2 and GameCube games.

Actually, perhaps it's not just my opinion. The truth is that the PlayStation2 is widely enjoyed as a DVD player. And the GameCube has many appealing titles in development but they're taking quite a long time before they appear on the market.





TOKYO GAME LIFE

Lupin Kojima, assistant chief editor, 'Famitsu Wave DVD'

Kojima-san sees signs of an Xbox revival in Japan

returned to the store, in theory simply to report on how it was doing. The store was extremely popular apparently, but that was not the reason for his large smile, or the big bag he was holding. What the hell did he buy? When I asked him, he replied sheepishly, "I wanted an Xbox."

People who don't own a PlayStation2 have a perfectly valid reason to buy the Xbox – they want to experience videogames. Everyone else… well, why would they bother to buy a machine that is so hard to get games for over here? However, this person already has a PlayStation2; he bought the Xbox, and told me the following thing, "I just wanted a second hardcore platform." Everyone knows the Xbox is struggling badly in Japan, and it is equally perceived that the PlayStation2 and GameCube are selling with, to use an otaku phrase, the warp engine engaged. My colleague told me that Xbox was selling a lot, too. Well, I knew he was telling a little bit of a white lie, but it made feel happy anyway.

On February 22, 2002, the black ship arrived – just like the seafaring vessel that arrived from America at the end of the 19th century, marking the end of Japanese isolation. All the coverage in Japan was centred on this parallel, as well as the fact that Microsoft (whose PC simulations are popular here) was coming to the console market. But, as we all know, the system experienced difficulties.

selling sufficient numbers in Japan. However, I have the feeling that, even now, there is a gently growing interest about this platform around me. Why is that? The answer is simple. It looks like there are more exclusive titles on Xbox that appeal directly to a very specific Japanese audience.

I want to enjoy an action game right now. I want to be piloting a gigantic military robot using this crazy-as-hell, giant controller. In that sense, that the Xbox is slowly becoming the focus of the Japanese hardcore may not sound crazy after all. It has exactly that potential.

"At work, I am surrounded by numerous 'veteran' players, and the feeling is that they are bored with PlayStation2 and GameCube games"

Among those coming titles you'll first encounter Tecmo's *Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball*. It's quite a game, one which, almost uniquely in terms of Xbox, has had a true impact on the Japanese videogame press. At the time of writing, the game is scheduled to be launched in the US on January 1, 2003 and Japan on January 23, 2003. It should do a good job of really helping the sales of Xbox in Japan.

Then there's Namco's *Break Down*, a game scheduled for a release in summer 2003. It appears to be an action fighting game in which you fight only with your fists. And, of course, there is Microsoft's cutesy platformer, *Blinx: The Time Sweeper*, whose character design should appeal to the Japanese public, and Sega's *Panzer Dragoon Orta*, which has a very well respected history in Japan. And I'm sure there will be more exciting titles to launch after that.

So, the Japanese ratings are in place. Xbox Live is in place. Japanese players can now enjoy games from outside the country. And, little by little, Microsoft is introducing some genuine triple-A, must-have titles. When I think about all of that, I become more convinced that people who have, up to now, had a negative impression of this console may soon develop a rather more positive opinion.

Instead of talking negatively about Xbox and its current struggle in the east, I think we should start focusing on the unique game experience that it is capable of bringing to us in Japan. And, with that in mind, I firmly believe that the time when the three consoles – PlayStation2, GameCube *and* Xbox – are able to sit next to each other in otaku homes is getting closer and closer.

Lupin Kojima is the assistant chief editor of 'Famitsu Wave DVD', part of the Famitsu publishing portfolio

Edge's most wanted

Legend of Zelda: Winds of Takuto

Edge's own hands-on experiments with the new Zelda have left us hungry for more. But a big question remains over whether anyone over 15 will buy into it.



(GameCube) Nintendo

Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball

Honestly – the fact that a themed calendar landed on our doorstep had nothing to do with Tecmo's game being here. But will it be all style over substance?



(Xbox) Tecmo

Metroid Prime

Nintendo will be spoiling us with two Samus adventures in the space of a month. Expect a full examination of the *Metroid* appeal next issue.



(GameCube) Nintendo

O.TO.GI

Edge is dearly hoping that this ethereally atmospheric fairy tale destruct 'em up will be as enthralling as early code suggests, and that it gets a western release.



(Xbox) From Software

Network hazards

Taking online communion

To PC users online gaming is passe, but most console owners have yet to understand what all the fuss is about. If this month's prescreens, and Microsoft's optimism about Xbox Live (see p12), are anything to go by then PS2, Xbox and (possibly) GameCube owners should be very excited. Although the Dreamcast offered a glimpse of how an Internet connection can transform an ordinary game into something completely spellbinding (you only need log onto one of the lobbies in *Phantasy Star Online* to understand this) there are still readers out there who have yet to be convinced.

Which brings us on to the potential of *Network_Biohazard*. Some commentators have already suggested that Capcom's survival horror formula is incapable of being transformed by an online component. **Edge** begs to differ. Sure, the atmosphere, hammy plot, locales and restorative herbs, are bound to make an appearance, but this is missing the point of what connectivity can bring to a videogame. Namely, there's a strong sense of communion that can be profoundly overwhelming when people come together to experience a shared goal.

Details are still coming through about *Network_Biohazard*'s structure, but it's likely that player's will gather into groups of four before they begin exploring Raccoon City. Imagine that: four players, one large city, and biological freaks out for your blood. Do you all stick together in the hope that you can escape before the city is incinerated by the US government, or do you separate to speed up the rate of discovery.

Hard choices, and ones that are likely to be influenced by some tense scripting and dramatic set-pieces. Expect locations where characters are forced to go their own separate ways, situations that involve heavy cooperation and moments of intense action. Imagine adjusting to life on your own after the relative comfort zone of having compatriots at your side. Imagine the sense of pride when you pull a friend to safety from an attacking horde of zombies.

Of course, such scenarios occur when you go through a singleplayer *Biohazard* game, but meeting up with a CPU character offers none of the psychological depth you'll get from the networked version. There's just something uniquely rewarding about working through a game while cooperating with others – even if you're not in the same room as your partners. The terror-soaked stories you swap after the game is over is likely to be worth the online costs alone.





032



034



037



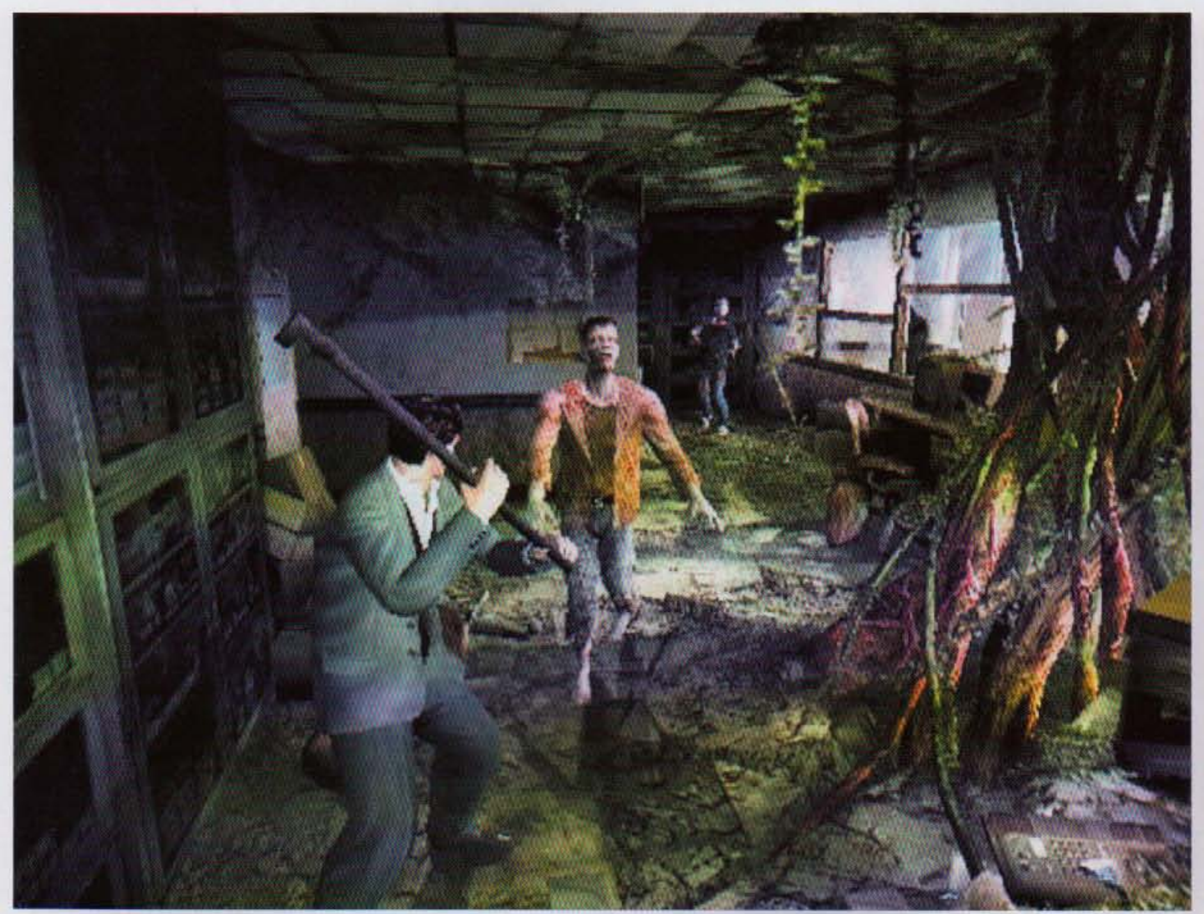
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042

Network_Biohazard

The survival horror game merges with disaster movie 'group dynamics' in Capcom's hotly anticipated online zombie romp







Groups of players have to join together to combat the swarming zombie foes. However, four gun-toting machos won't get you very far

When SCEI announced its broadband plans back in February, one of the most enticing demos on offer was *Biohazard Online*. Although present merely as a video snapshot, the sight of several S.T.A.R.S. members gunning down zombies and chatting onscreen was enough to pique the interest of the attendant press.

Since then, it's been nothing but bad news. The online service is not proving as successful as Sony hoped, mostly because its killer app, *Final Fantasy XI*, has failed to capture the imagination – and regular disposable income – of Japanese gamers. Then came *Biohazard* creator Shinji Mikami's decision to abandon PS2 development in favour of GC, taking the survival horror series with him. Fortunately however, *Street Fighter II* legend Noritaka Funamizu has stepped in to take over the PS2 project, now known as *Network_Biohazard*, and the great man has a strong vision for the title.

"Importantly, Capcom is aware that the cost of online gaming has been a major contributor towards consumer apathy"

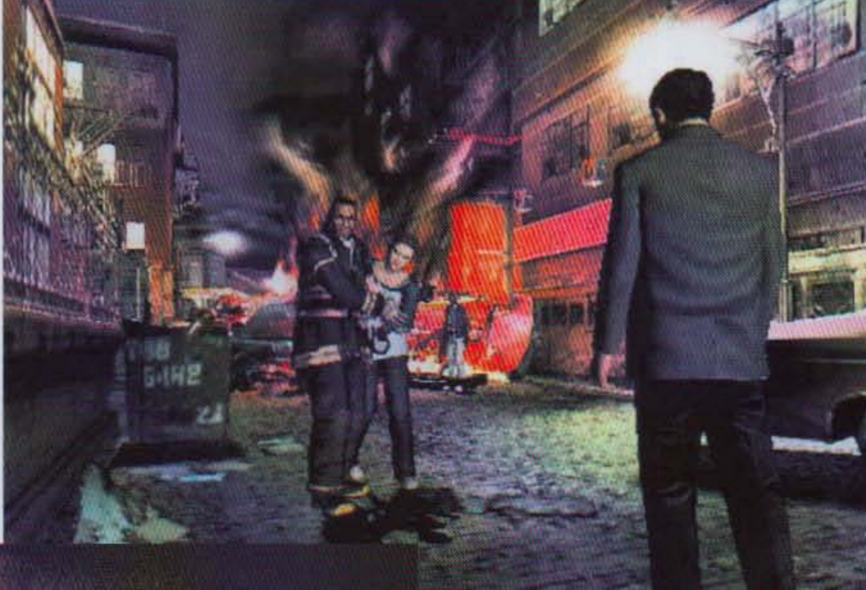
Set in Raccoon City in a time frame parallel to that of the original PSone incarnations, *Network_Biohazard* allows you to select one of eight characters all desperate to escape before the US government incinerates the town to stop the spread of the T-virus. In this race against time, players get into groups of four, exploring and solving puzzles while fighting against zombies *and* a new underclass of bandits intent on making a living from robbing other survivors – Capcom obviously has a keen understanding of human psychology.

Each of the eight characters has different skills and abilities, which will affect the way you play the game. So it's important to create a varied group. Four RPD commandos might have enough firepower to decimate an entire undead army, but the collective will lack other skills and areas of expertise necessary to ensure survival. Adding to this interplay, every character has objects they can and cannot use, so close cooperation is vital. There's also a sense of physical as well as intellectual interchange – it's possible to grab other players and haul them up on to high ground with you – or carry injured comrades. Funamizu-san is determined to make this an action-orientated experience, avoiding the chat-heavy 'gameplay' that's developed in *FFXI* (though it will be possible to communicate via keyboard).

Importantly, Capcom is aware that the significant cost of online gaming has been a major contributor towards consumer apathy. With *FFXI*, potential players have to buy the game itself, a hard drive, a keyboard and a modem. Then they have to subscribe to Play

Format: **PlayStation2**
Publisher: **Capcom**
Developer: **In-house**
Origin: **Japan**
Release: **2003**











Network Biohazard **takes the franchise back to its grubby Raccoon City roots. Back to stark urban terror**

Online as well as paying the usual ISP fees. *Network_Biohazard*, however, requires no hard drive and is available to both broadband and 56k modem users. There is no subscription fee either.

With this generous approach in mind, the prospect of starring in a multiplayer survival horror disaster movie will no doubt prove irresistible to fans of the series. Capcom will have to translate perfectly the tense, tightly driven narrative of the singleplayer *Res Evil* experience to this new multiplayer domain, and this may prove problematic. But with Funamizu-san at the helm, **Edge** suspects all is in hand. And – *Gun Survivor* aside – when has *Biohazard* ever let us down?



Players start the game isolated, but must meet up with other players as they go along. Not all enemies will be this easy to dispatch one on one. It's good to see the gore factor remains high

Eve Online: The Second Genesis

A massively multiplayer Elite has been something of a Holy Grail for online developers. Finally, it appears to be getting closer...



The 3D radar display in the bottom right-hand corner of the screen bears a marked resemblance to the system used in *Elite*. *Eve Online* also features upgradeable shields – something familiar to *Elite* veterans



The game features an enormous range of weapons and items with which to upgrade your craft. You'll have to earn the cash first, though



In December last year **Edge** visited embryonic developer CCP as it began beta testing something of a fantasy for veteran gamers everywhere: a massively multiplayer take on *Elite*. Now, new details are emerging, fleshing out the intriguing concept.

Eve Online revolves around five contrasting human colonies, based millions of light years from Earth. The game allows 100,000 players to inhabit a "fully 3D" galaxy made up of 5,000 solar systems. First, participants choose which of the races they want to belong to – Amarr, Caldari, Jove, Minmatar or Gallente. All have their own characteristics. The Caldari run a heartless capitalist state, for example, while the Jove are a mysterious and elusive micro-sect with stunningly state-of-the-art technology.

Next, subscribers select from a variety of professions including trader, pirate and space soldier – the options available differing depending on which colonial race you went for at the beginning. From these foundations, it is possible to develop new skills, explore new areas and update your space craft.

"Edge is not yet sure if you'll be able to trade in slaves and narcotics, a la David Braben's BBC classic, but we can hope"

Sixty models are on offer, together with dozens of accessories, including weapons, shields, sensors, etc. Cash can be gathered by carrying out missions set by NPCs or by joining and doing work for the huge corporations set up by groups of players. You'll be able to apply to the latter via the game's multi-faceted communication system which employs email, message boards and instant messaging. However, there's no word on voice comm support yet.

As in *Elite*, there is a simulated economy at the heart of the action. Here, players can invest in various corporations, the value of which increase and decrease as trade occurs – just like in real life. **Edge** is not yet sure if you'll be able to trade in slaves and narcotics, a la David Braben's BBC classic, but we can hope.

Cable and Wireless will be running the UK arm of the *Eve Online* service, with 60 dedicated servers and an expected monthly charge of around $12.95 (£8.14) or $10.95 (£6.88) a month if you commit to six months. With the developer promising a combination of *Elite*'s trading aspects with *Wing Commander*'s flight combat, all in a sustained (and rather gorgeous looking) universe, this seems more than reasonable.

With those lovely visuals, a clearly well-thought out structure and plenty of beta testing behind it, CCP could be on the verge of installing the next essential massively multiplayer experience. In addition to *Elite* fetishists it will attract those who find the fantasy worlds of *Ultima* and *EverQuest* unpalatable. Of course, the key concern is security. Just how long will it be before misanthropic geeks hack in and start messing with the system? The world of *Elite* was lonely, but at least you knew there was no chance of a hacker from Idiotsville, Texas bringing down a Thargoid invasion fleet on your 'sorry ass'.

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Crucial Entertainment**
Developer: **Crowd Control Production**
Origin: **Iceland**
Release: **March 2003**
Previously in **E**106

These quite astonishing screens hint at epic space battles within crowded star systems. Expect to find out whether the promising gameplay matches the visuals in a future issue

There are around 60 different craft types in the game. Your chosen profession will probably guide you in your choice: traders will need storage space while pirates will need fast ships loaded with weaponry

StarCraft: Ghost

Format: **Xbox, PS2, GC**
Publisher: **Vivendi**
Developer: **Blizzard and Nihilistic Software**
Origin: **US**
Release: **Winter 2003**

Blizzard returns to its console origins for a radical new take on the multi-million selling StarCraft franchise. RTS obsessives should look away now...

Setting out its console ambitions from the start, Blizzard made the decision to announce its latest *StarCraft* title at the Tokyo Game Show, rather than the more PC fanboy-friendly E3, which took place just a few months before. *StarCraft: Ghost*, you see, is no RTS.

Revolving around the *StarCraft* universe and its warring factions, this latest addition features Nova, a 'Ghost' operative with enhanced physical and psionic abilities. Employed by the Terran Dominion (one of the three tribes of the original game), she/you must engage in a range of stealth missions on various planets as war rages all around. Essentially you're taking on a single role in the *StarCraft* system, rather than overseeing the whole offensive. However, Nova is also able to arrange back-up, calling in air strikes and sending out for armoured vehicles. There are also occasions where fighting occurs all around Nova while she's completing a covert objective, providing perfect diversionary fodder for a sneaky agent.

So *Metal Gear Solid* meets *Dynasty Warriors*, in space? More or less. But there are plenty of new ideas. Nova can use her Ghost suit augmentations to travel at supersonic speed, and the outfit also doubles as a cloaking device. She can also employ her psionic powers to lock-down enemy vehicles. Naturally, there are plenty of meaty weapons, including all manner of mega-guns and more stealth-friendly knives. Judging by the materials shown at the TGS press event, Nova is something of an athlete, climbing, jumping and edging along walls, ladders and cables. As well as calling out for vehicular support, it seems that the adaptable femme fatale is able to pilot a number of air and land craft. An impressive CV all round then.

Long ago, before the big PC hits, Blizzard started out as console developer Silicon & Synapse, with titles such as *Lost Vikings* and *Rock 'n Roll Racing* on the SNES and Mega Drive. The company, then, seems determined to ensure *Ghost* is not viewed as some half-baked spin-off from its PC-based *StarCraft* behemoth. Certainly the screenshots are impressive and if the gameplay can capture the feeling of being one figure in a massive warzone, it should be a unique experience, a real shot in the arm for the stealth canon.

It seems that game design is becoming more like bio-engineering – taking DNA from different genres and re-animating them. *StarCraft: Ghost* looks to be one of Frankenstein's more promising monsters.













This close, thirdperson environment reveals the radical change in direction Blizzard has taken with its latest *StarCraft* title. However, the characters, weapons and vehicles will be familiar to fans of the series

F-Zero AC/GC

Format: **Arcade, GC**
Publisher: **Sega/Nintendo**
Developer: **Amusement Vision/NCL**
Origin: **Japan**
Release: **2003**

Previously in **E**115

Nintendo's futuristic racer is set to return in a two-pronged strategy with Amusement Vision. And as Nagoshi-san reveals new demo footage, it's clear Sega's spin-off team is sizing up well for the job



Amusement Vision's take on *F-Zero* is suitably gorgeous to look at with vast futuristic environments looming beneath the circuits. The layout of the tracks has been designed in such a way as to create 'rhythmic' play

Earlier this year Nintendo and Sega announced an intriguing joint project to revive the former's *F-Zero* franchise, with Amusement Vision handling an arcade version and NCL working on the GameCube equivalent. Recently AV's Toshihiro Nagoshi revealed a new video of the coin-op at TIGRAF – the new Tokyo International CG festival, which featured talks by leading videogame publishers such as Namco (promoting *MotoGP 3*, *Ace Combat 5* and a new racing game featuring real GT cars), Capcom and Sega on the final day.

The demo showed the classic racer clearly benefitting from Sega's arcade racing know-how. The rollercoaster-style circuits – similar perhaps to those in *F-Zero X* on N64 – plummet by in a flash of dramatic lighting and heat haze. Cyberpunk cityscapes sprawl below giving a similar sense of depth to Treasure's latest shooters. It's incredibly beautiful and incredibly fast – speed, untethered by friction, has always been a key theme of the series. Now it seems technology has finally caught up with that vision. Interestingly, Nagoshi-san began his presentation by reminiscing over *Daytona USA*. The new *F-Zero* seems to have a tinge of that game's attitude. With talk of memory card data swaps between arcade and GC versions the two are obviously being developed in close conjunction. Could this be the beginning of a beautiful friendship?





The latest video demo revealed plenty of impressive spot effects including heat haze and light trails behind the speeding crafts

Sly Raccoon

Format: **PlayStation2**
Publisher: **SCEE**
Developer: **Sucker Punch**
Origin: **US**
Release: **January 2003**

Previously in **E**113

There's a new thief in town apparently. He seems to have the rather unfortunate habit of dying repeatedly though





Sudden death is always just around the corner for Sly Raccoon, which seems strange for such a well developed (in videogame terms) character



Sucker Punch simply doesn't seem to have matched the rewards to the risks in this early build of the game, but hopefully this will be amended for the final release. In any case, the lovely visuals should offset some frustration

Apart from the new name, not much has changed about *Sly Raccoon* since **Edge** last saw it. It remains visually resplendent and still boasts a consummate degree of characterisation. But strangely for a game that seems to be aimed at a relatively young audience, it also maintains an unusually harsh insistence on killing off its lead character at every available opportunity. Which seems rather a waste of all the effort that's clearly been devoted to the Saturday matinee/cartoon aesthetic of the game – though perhaps Sucker Punch is hoping to attract an 'Itchy and Scratchy' demographic.

Levels are overwhelmingly linear to the point of having start them again from scratch if you miss certain pick-ups, which can get extremely frustrating – as can the one-hit kill obstacles that pepper the courses. It is possible, by picking up a lucky horseshoe or 100 coins to get a second chance, but it's an undeniably cruel structure for a genre that's become a lot kinder over the years.

In other ways though, Sucker Punch is on surer ground, offering enough leaping, crawling and climbing to rival any recent platform titles. And with the likes of *Ratchet & Clank* and *Blinx: The Time Sweeper* offering varying degrees of disappointment, the game's confident sense of style may compensate for the slightly creaky mechanics.

Prescreen Alphas

This month's announcements and updates...

Biohazard 0

Format: GameCube
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-house





While putting E118 together, Edge had the chance to witness a substantial segment of this new *Biohazard* instalment. No gameplay surprises yet but expect a review next issue

Devil May Cry 2

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-house





Capcom has revealed the game's Devil Trigger system: collect three pieces to form an amulet, giving you the ability to fly, perform electrical attacks and a third, as yet unknown, option

Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles

Format: GameCube
Publisher: Square
Developer: In-house





A Square production on an NCL home console after all, then. Action RPG, *Zelda* style, GBA controlled, fourplayer emphasis and plot focusing on crystals of first *FF* titles. Early 2003

Final Fantasy X-2

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Square
Developer: In-house





With *FFXII* not expected until end of 2003, this fan-requested *FFX* extension (there will no longer be two versions as previously expected) delivers a thoroughly evolved combat system

Biohazard Gun Survivor 4

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-house





Viewed in thirdperson as you move freely within stages, the action switches to firstperson when shooting the undead with the automatic arsenal available. Adventure elements are also included

Space Raiders

Format: GameCube
Publisher: Taito
Developer: In-house





Taito updates *Space Invaders*. Move sideways, shoot at a wave of advancing aliens, take occasional cover behind objects (eg cars). You can also upgrade your weapon and face bosses

Ape Escape 2

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: SCEE
Developer: In-house (SCEI)





The PAL version of the sequel to one of the most ingenious and (as pointed out in Trigger Happy last month) criminally overlooked platformers of recent times is finally reviewed next month

Legend of Zelda: Winds of Takuto

Format: GameCube
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: In-house





Sorry, no new info – just new shots of cel-shaded goodness. As with previous *Zelda* titles, Edge will abstain from testing the Japanese version, reviewing the US version instead

Tenerezza

Format: Xbox, PC
Publisher: Aquaplus
Developer: In-house





A beautiful 3D RPG out mid-December in Japan. Possibly too young for **Edge**'s audience but included here as an encouraging sign of the growing aesthetic diversity of Xbox titles

The Getaway

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: SCEE
Developer: In-house (Team Soho)





Cut-scenes are still execrable, Mark Hammond still looks like he's constipated, but the driving sections now show a great deal of promise. As for how it all gels, the review next issue will tell

Get Backers Dakkandayo! Zeninshugo!!

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Konami
Developer: In-house





A director's cut rather than a true sequel to the popular manga licence turned 2D action sidescrolling videogame. The major addition remains the introduction of twoplayer gameplay

Primal

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: SCEE
Developer: In-house (Team Cambridge)





Technically accomplished, *Primal* continues to impress since its E3 appearance, though **Edge** remains slightly concerned about the dynamic of the two characters. More on this next month

Will Rock

Format: PC
Publisher: Ubi Soft
Developer: Saber Interactive





FPS set in ancient Greece incorporating puzzle elements, original weapons and mythology's considerable foes. "Shattering" technology allows high player/environment interaction

Battle Engine Aquila

Format: Xbox, PS2
Publisher: Infogrames
Developer: Lost Toys





Eschewing the pseudo simulation approach of the likes of *Tekki*, *Aquila* is satisfyingly immediate, and looking highly polished at this stage. Shame the titular robot can't swim

War of the Monsters

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: SCEE
Developer: Incognito Inc Entertainment/SCEA





One of the games that escaped **Edge**'s attention at this year's E3 but the idea of monstrous twoplayer encounters and mass devastation certainly appeals. Expected March next year

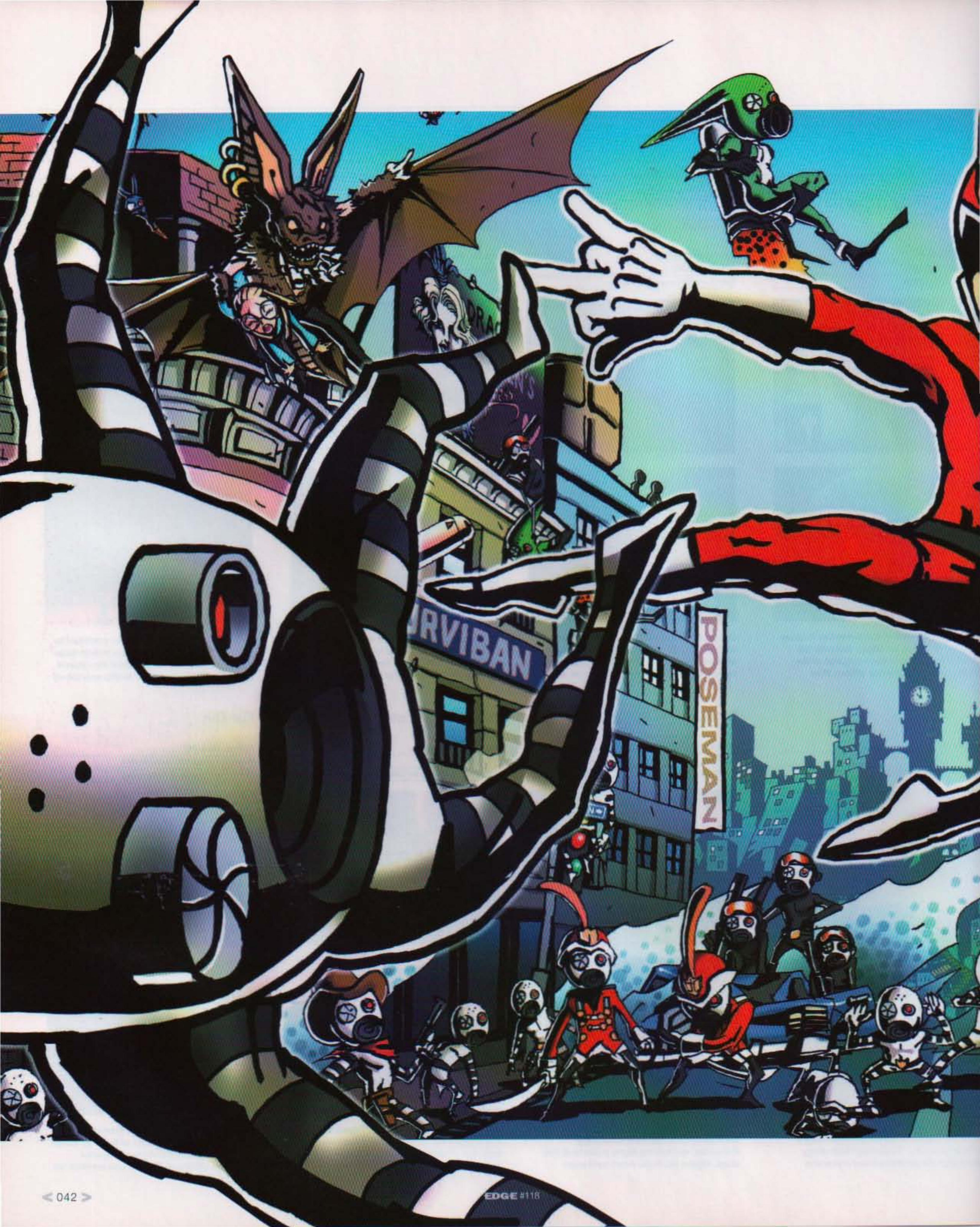
Flat-Out

Format: Xbox, PC
Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios
Developer: Bugbear Entertainment





Hey, it's a racing game! Repair your car, interact with other characters as part of the story-driven Career mode. Realistic damage, superior modelling, advanced AI, Xbox Live enabled, etc



URVIBAN
POSEMAN



Viewtiful Joe

After the cel-shaded anime excesses of Auto Modellista, Capcom has obviously developed a taste for experimental visuals. Viewtiful Joe pushes the avant-garde envelope even further

An interesting and much discussed dichotomy has opened up in videogame design. On the one hand, advanced graphics technology has allowed developers to achieve greater and greater visual realism. On the other, it has encouraged some to take a more self-conscious, stylised approach. The cel-shading fad, for example, was empowered by 128bit processing and has opened up new possibilities in terms of what the arbitrary phrase 'good graphics' can mean. With photorealism in sight, many are now breaking away from mere reproduction. It's like art's response to the birth of photography.

Take *Viewtiful Joe*. Originally conceived as a music game (the birthplace of self-conscious visuals? See *PaRappa* and *Beat Mania*), producer **Atsushi Inaba** – previously responsible for similarly experimental mech sim *Tekki* – realised that the genre was overcrowded and decided to morph his project into an action game, while retaining a brash, stylised rhythm action aesthetic. Bringing onboard *Devil May Cry* creator Kamiya Hideki as game director, Inaba-san hoped to replicate that successful combination of cool visual style and fundamentally simple gameplay.

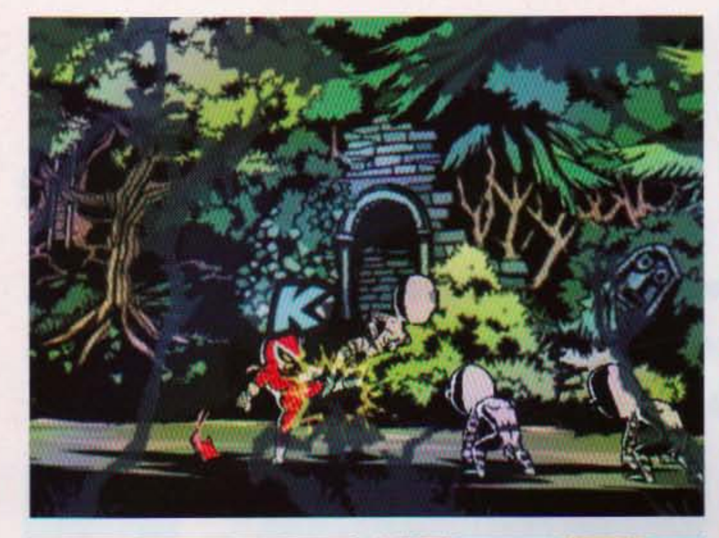
Visual style is a central component of *Viewtiful Joe*. On a basic level the game represents a return to the old-skool: a 2D side-scrolling fighter – like *Green Beret* viewed through some kind of ketamine haze. But, you don't just have control over the lead character, you control the time/space movement of the whole scene, using three functions: high-speed,


Joe can pull off standard kicks and punches, but beat 'em up-style combinations give rise to more powerful special moves and attacks





- Format: **GameCube**
- Publisher: **Capcom**
- Developer: **In-house**
- Release: **Spring 2003**
- Origin: **Japan**







Viewtiful Joe's heavily inked background visuals reveal the American comic book influences that play behind the more obvious anime stylings. It's an effective combination



slow and zoom. Self-evidently, the first function speeds the game up – useful when you're passing through a long corridor littered with traps – "Crossing it at high speed will save you heavy damages," explains Inaba-san. This mode also lets you perform high-speed attacks, getting in multiple moves on unwary enemies. Slow down works like *Max Payne*'s bullet-time. It lets players read and react to fast enemy strikes. Finally, zoom provides a close-up view of the character, adding efficiency and power to attacks – although it's not yet clear how. On top of this, there are standard kick, punch, jump and dodge moves which can be strung together into combos.

Inaba-san is keen to point out that the zoom, high-speed and slow options aren't just a gimmick. Ensuring that the manipulation elements became an intrinsic component of the gameplay was vital. "To let people act in realtime on the game flow is something very challenging, not just technically, but in terms of the 'fun factor'. Why would players have to use these features? Is there a chance you could get through using only kicks and punches? There would be no point in releasing such a game if that was the case. So we've had to create the need." Which may mean encountering enemies that seem to attack with one unavoidable deadly blow. Slow the game down though, and you see it's actually three fast punches which can be blocked individually. There will be more imaginative examples, **Edge** is sure.

"You actually create each situation in the game, rather than just experience it. You create the character's coolness, in fact it'll depend on your idea of coolness"

There's also a sense of creating an individual experience for each player, depending on how they manipulate the footage. "You actually create each situation in the game, rather than just experience it. You create the character's coolness, in fact it'll depend on your idea of coolness." It's a difficult concept to comprehend without seeing the game running. But one thing you can appreciate is the singular look.

The weird bunch

Characterisation mixes Japanese influences (most obviously, the 'super-deformed' look) with more westernised facial features. This combination infuses the entire project to great effect.















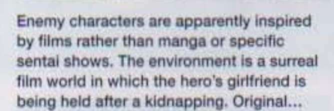












Enemy characters are apparently inspired by films rather than manga or specific sentai shows. The environment is a surreal film world in which the hero's girlfriend is being held after a kidnapping. Original...



The visual style, is a combination of Japanese superhero and American comic book. The former influence is obvious in Joe's costume, the bright, semi-armoured suit, the over-sized helmet, it's a look taken straight from the superhero, or sentai (meaning 'ranger') shows that flooded Japanese TV in the '60s and '70s and finally found their way west in the '80s courtesy of the 'Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers'. Even the lead character's range of special items harks back to typical sentai such as Kamen Rider and Ultraman: he can occasionally call on a giant robot for help, and has the use of a superbike for certain sequences.

There's a hint of geekiness about this superhero lead, but the team is conscious of this and it's part of the overall determination to make *Viewtiful Joe* stand apart from current industry vogue. "We are at a time in which realistic character design is common. Male characters get cooler every time and female characters more... sexy, for example *DoA Xtreme Beach Volleyball*. So you are stuck in these two directions and no one expects changes. I thought it was time to bring in something new."

Anime techniques are apparent too – the effective and unusual use of depth of field blurring for instance. Inaba-san continues, "For the backgrounds, it is a very special style you would not encounter often in a videogame. I think we make quite an impact. We did not use Capcom's 'Toon Shading' technology, we preferred to develop our own. We needed different rendering, adapted to our project." There's also a neat merger of old-skool and modern techniques in the environment modelling. Although the action is 2D, the backgrounds are effectively 3D – when the hero approaches a corner, the background rotates, showing him turning into the next street. It's just one of the many 3D effects in the game.

The 'plot', too, harks back to '80s gaming in its dismissive simplicity. You play a kid whose girlfriend is kidnapped and taken to a 'movie dimension'. Your role is to rescue her, fighting through eight stages (there could be more by the end of development), each closed with a boss fight.

Diurnal range

The action takes place over one day – as in *Devil May Cry* – and Inaba-san reckons each of the stages takes around an hour to complete. Typically, though, the designers are building in replay value – levels can be finished in a number of different ways, so it'll be possible to go back and explore new possibilities. It's a feature Inaba-san used previously in *Tekki*.

Regulating the hero's use of superpowers is his VFX gauge. The name, apparently a nod to the phrase



Boss encounters end each of the eight stages, in a self-consciously old-skool structure. It's not completely linear, though, as each level offers multiple routes











In a strange blend of 2D and 3D, *Viewtiful Joe*'s background environments rotate around the lead character as he explores. This spiral staircase is a case in point. The old 'avoid the giant barrel' trap shows Capcom's gameplay influences are unabashedly '80s

visual effects, has been chosen to accentuate the cinematic theme. Powering up the gauge gives access to more damaging moves, but accruing damage drains the bar – when it gets to nought, Joe turns back into a regular guy. Defeat enough enemies, gain enough special bonuses, and the gauge fills, the superhero returns.

The themes of manipulation and transmogrification evident though the visuals and gameplay, are finally reflected in the music. The team is working on a realtime soundtrack that alters in relation to the onscreen action, rather than something streamed from CD. This element has been criminally under-explored on next-gen formats – with only the likes of *Rez* and *Frequency* similarly manipulating the possibilities of audio.

Name shame

About the name. It's terrible. And the developers even realise it's terrible for foreign gamers. But they chose it for a reason, and they're not going to change it. As Inaba-san explains, "It's Kamiya Hideki's creation. He wanted to express the beauty of the fighting moves. Also the visual impact is important in this title so the world 'view' is obvious. Now I realise overseas people may not like it. I was told it could sound stupid. I don't care since I prefer to release a game worldwide under the same title." So get used to it.

As you'd expect, *Viewtiful Joe* has been a journey of discovery, of trial and error, for Inaba-san and his team. Originally pitched at young gamers, the producer decided to aim higher when a test group of kids found the visual style 'uncool'. Now confident in finding an audience, Inaba-san is talking about using the engine again, perhaps in a series of *Viewtiful Joe* games, perhaps in new areas. He has one more action game to work on after this, but would also like to try out an RPG. It would be immensely refreshing to see *Viewtiful Joe*'s avant-garde approach applied to that staid, over-earnest genre.

Whatever the case, **Edge** has high hopes for this game. It is through mutations like this that game design can and must evolve.





Sudeki

Fabulous lighting effects, strong characters, sorcery, experience points and a fishing mini-game – Sudeki is everything you'd expect of a modern RPG. But, Edge discovers, it has an element that could leave Final Fantasy standing...

If you want confirmation that Microsoft is serious about its long-term plans for Xbox, then consider this: *Sudeki 2* is already in production. For Climax the game is a huge undertaking. For Microsoft it's a franchising opportunity.

Edge is lucky, in that its visit coincides with an inspection from the game's publisher and it's a splendid chance to put the game in some context. "We wanted a developer that could put its balls where its mouth was," comments **Peter Connelly**, Microsoft's program manager on *Sudeki*. "Climax had a vision and a strong portfolio. We wanted someone who could provide us with a quality RPG and the Japanese just couldn't give us the goods."

On further questioning about Microsoft's dire position in Japan, Connelly is more cautious. "We knew it was going to be difficult, and it turned out to be even more difficult than we anticipated." He changes tack, "But *Sudeki* is generating a lot of excitement with our Japanese subsidiary. It's just the sort of game that can be a console seller. That's what we're hoping for. *Sudeki* is not just a one off – it's going to be a big franchise." The notion that Microsoft couldn't find a Japanese developer of RPGs with faith in the Xbox hangs in the air, but Connelly won't be drawn on the subject.

"We picked our battles carefully," comes in **Joseph Cavalla**, managing director of Climax Solent. "We know we're largely competing against *Final Fantasy* and *Zelda*. I think when we,

Format: **Xbox**
Publisher: **Microsoft Game Studios**
Developer: **Climax Solent**
Origin: **UK**
Release: **Q4 2003**

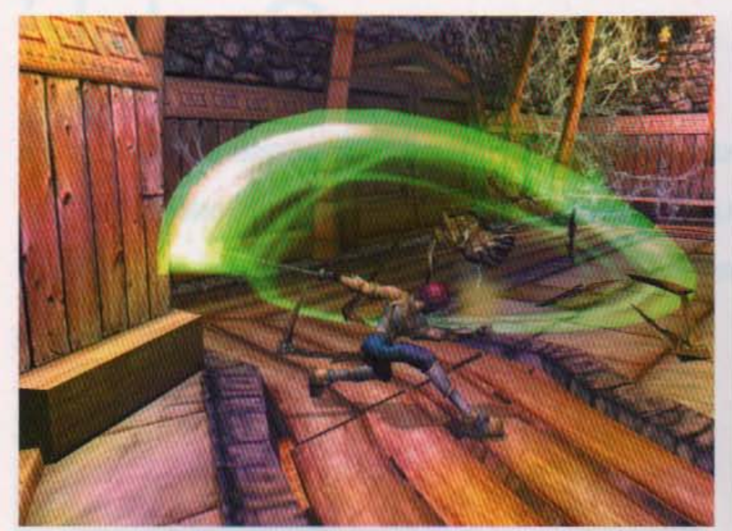




Buki is the martial arts master of the team and her athletic ability means she can climb sheer surfaces. Other characters will join your party of four and can be alternated at certain 'rest' points

and the team, know that, then we can focus and work towards a common goal." *Final Fantasy*? *Zelda*? High ambitions indeed.

But building a franchise takes more than money and marketing. Thankfully, present evidence suggests that there's the body of a good game to pin such big hopes on. *Sudeki* has a team of 50 working on it, and every aspect, from the magic system through to the monster texturing is being produced with meticulous care. The whole team works on the same floor ensuring that communication is swift and there is clearly a good work ethic within a relaxed atmosphere. Looking around the Climax Solent office – which looks out onto a redeveloped Portsmouth harbour – you might, for a brief moment, be



The animation is impressive and the combo system fluid and intuitive. Camera problems still exist in tight spaces, but they're not nearly as bad as many finished 3D games currently on the market





forgiven for thinking that you've entered a Japanese coding house.

"*Sudeki* is the Holy Grail for a lot of these guys," continues Cavalla. "It's good to be working on such a big and original project that can inspire the whole team. The only problem we have is with the artists. Sometimes you can kill the creatures so quickly that you don't get to appreciate all the work that has gone into them."

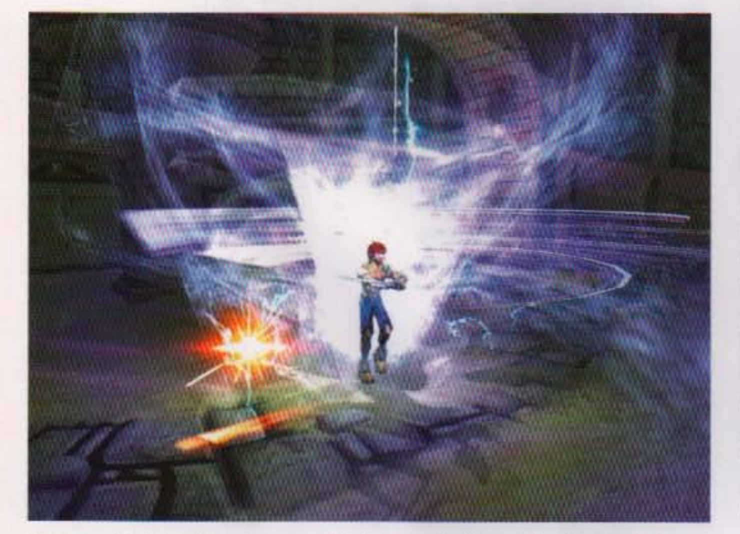
It's clear, then, that *Sudeki* has the team and structure behind it to make it stand shoulder to shoulder with any non-Japanese RPG, but can it really eclipse *Final Fantasy*? Again, the team is confident that the game's unique combat system will set it apart from anything else on the market. The title's one true claim to brilliance is that all the combat takes place in realtime. It may seem like a minor detail but **Edge** can vouch that it changes the player's whole approach to the experience. Think about it: no more dislocation as the disk loads another battlefield, no clumsy menu accessing, and no more random encounters. Yes, hear it loud and clear: no more random encounters.

Roaming holiday

Encounters will be 'room' specific. Even in the wilderness, areas are set apart – such as a bridge location, a craggy outcrop or the base of a waterfall – where combat will take place. The placement of portals should ensure that the same series of battles will not have to be fought again (the only exception to this is when you go back searching for secrets). Although the player is completely free to roam back through locations already visited, the game has been designed to cut down on frustration, mindless wandering and repetitive battles. In this respect it's likely to be a qualitatively different experience to the *Final Fantasy* games.

Unfettered from the constraints of turn-based combat the player now has a host of combos, special moves and magic effects to make encounters tense and interesting. Basic commands consist of A for a light attack, X for a heavy attack, B to block and Y to call up spells or items. Several three-string combos can be executed easily, with many more becoming available as characters level up. **Edge** experienced the combat first hand, and given that we played such an early build, it was engaging and satisfying. The camera behaves itself particularly well – especially given the enclosed architecture in which the battles were fought – and there's a lock-on to help targeting.

"We've really enjoyed the tech side of things," enthuses **Tuomas Pirinen**, the game's lead designer. "We've built the combat and spell system from



Don't expect the finished game to come with visuals of quite this resolution. However, Edge can safely say that the art style in the working demo is excellent with American manga leanings



scratch to give gamers a real alternative to other RPGs. It's been tough, but as you can see we're nearly there now. It's been like a massive multi-cell creature that we can't keep control of."

Bow selecta

It's noticeable that a great deal of thought has gone into the menu system and command method. Mostly, characters can be selected, or spells initiated with a single button press, ensuring that combat remains frantic and fluid. But if the menu is required (to select a different weapon or item) a bullet-time effect comes into play, so you still have to think on your feet because the action never fully pauses. The device is both intuitive and dramatic.

Cavalla and Pirinen confide that they used *Devil May Cry* as a model of excellence in terms of realtime combat, picking it apart over mammoth testing sessions. They hope to replicate some of its essence in *Sudeki*. But *Sudeki* is a more complicated beast. Although the player begins with one character, more become available as the game progresses, with a maximum of four in the party at any one time.

"We wanted a developer that could put its balls where its mouth was. We wanted someone who could provide us with a quality RPG and the Japanese couldn't give us the goods"

Switching between the team members is simply a matter of pressing the black or white Xbox button, and AI strings control the members not in use. Yet cleverly, these AI states can be chosen by the player (such as Support, Retreat or Focused Attack) and they become more sophisticated as the characters gain experience. On later levels you can use AI commands such as Body Guard Mêlée – where one character protects another so spells can be cast without interference.

The four main heroes consist of Tal, a young gifted swordsman with an outgoing personality; Ailish, daughter of an empress and adept in the arts of magic; Elco a university egg-head with a penchant for pistols; and Buki, an antromorph (part animal, part human) with incredible martial arts abilities.

Along the route the player will find 'Masters' who can be assigned to the characters to help build up their stats. There will also be a raft of mini-games – expect fishing, sheep herding and shooting sections.

Sudeki, then, is very much a reworking of traditional principles

elevated by an emphasis on slick and satisfying combat. Each character even has individual powers (always necessary for good puzzle solving). Tal can push and lift heavy objects, Elco is equipped with a rocketpack to reach high places, Buki can climb sheer surfaces and Ailish can see magically hidden objects.

There's nothing wrong with using such tried-and-tested elements, **Edge** only hopes that they are used in the game with imagination. Hopefully, this won't lead to an over emphasis on lever pulling and maze wandering.

"More than anything we wanted to make it fun," adds **Eamon Murtagh**, one of the game's designers and the writer of the storyline. "The characters respond like everyday people, there's none of this 'I am Thor the Warrior' nonsense. To enhance this we're using respected voice talent and recording the main scenes with all the actors in the same room, so it's much more fluent and realistic."

"Some stringent focus grouping was done to find the game's perfect niche. 'We tested it on teenagers and got the obvious response. More tits and asses was the consensus'"



The four heroes must initially hunt out power crystals. So far, so clichéd. But Climax promises a plot with complexity

This is not the place to go into massive plot explication but Climax promises to buck RPG tradition by bringing in shades of grey to the usual good versus evil formula. All will not be as it seems, is the official line coming out of the company. **Edge** later learns that some epic 'Dungeons & Dragons' sessions have fuelled much of the creative energy behind the plot.

Patron state

As you'd also expect, spell craft plays a major role in the game. Along with magic that can produce projectile attacks and alter condition states (such as cure slow) there are some OTT summoning spells. Each team member is capable of summoning a 'patron' spirit if he or she links up with another party member. These spells are fabulous and powerful, provoking spectacular lighting effects and decimating rooms full of creatures. No, not wholly original, but pleasingly cathartic nonetheless.

Already, the prognosis for *Sudeki* looks very good indeed. This is unlikely to be another *Nightcaster*,



The music in the game is particularly striking and segues from the dramatic to the calm depending on the tempo of the situation









but it's disappointing to hear that Microsoft seems to have little intention of either exporting this game to Japan or signing up a prominent Japanese RPG developer to help revive the Xbox in the east. Cavalla admits that some stringent focus grouping was done to find the game's perfect niche. "We tested it on teenagers and got the obvious response. More tits and asses was pretty much the consensus."

Whether this advice was heeded or not isn't entirely clear, but Climax and Microsoft are focused on one audience: North Americans. *Sudeki* may eventually get localised for Japan, but that such a move is not high on Microsoft's priority list is telling.

If Climax can do for RPGs what *MotoGP* did for motorbike racing games, then *Sudeki* will be a stunning achievement. God knows the Xbox needs a successful RPG to bolster its blooming, though not sterling, portfolio.



The Spirit Strike skill is the most devastating in the game, capable of vanquishing hordes of enemies. It takes two to enact and the combinations – and resulting phantasmagoria – alter depending on which characters team up. As you'd expect, it drains all magic energy



Game of Cha

8-Adult

1-6bn players

Rich man, poor man, beggarman… development is full of surprises. Risk everything for big gains or quietly acquire a shining reputation? You can make a lot of money. And promptly lose it again. **Edge** listens to the testimonies of those that have played the game, and paid the ultimate price…

nce

A game of skill and chance, videogame development is a risky business. Will you dare to take on the challenge?





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Buy wisely, speculate shrewdly and program with flair. Success depends on luck and skill – just as in real life



Millionaire's Mansion or an early grave, developing a videogame can lead to fabulous riches or abject poverty

Why was I proud to be associated with Looking Glass?" echoes **Warren Spector**. "So many reasons. For one thing, it isn't every day you find yourself surrounded by people so smart, so dedicated and so innovative. Everyone at the company, from [founders] Paul Neurath and Ned Lerner on down, was dedicated to advancing the state of the art in gaming. And they did just that. How many firsts were they responsible for? How many innovative titles did they release?"

Looking Glass: pioneer, innovator, dead.

Like the music and film businesses before it, the games industry's transition from small, hobbyist enterprises to the corporate behemoths, aspirant middleweights and varied independent outfits of today has seen countless casualties. Include the innumerable fly-by-night prospectors of the 8bit gold rush, and the company death toll reaches thousands. Although the games software world has stabilised, certainly over the past decade, it remains a particularly volatile, unforgiving business. How many devcos are a misfortune or missed milestone payment away from oblivion? Too many. How many publishers are one dud launch or profits warning away from succumbing to an acquisitive rival? At least a few. While seeking to offload its new media possessions, Viacom once invited Electronic Arts to take a bite of the once-mighty Virgin Interactive, and what remains still bleeds to this day.

START

Acquire funding from any number of sources – such as venture capital, bank loan or personal funds – and your devco is go!

Move into a pokey office unfit for human habitation. Pay £2000

Advertise for staff in **Edge**. Pay a very reasonable sum…

Discover star coder willing to work for peanuts. Go forward 3 spaces.

Buy office furniture from a dead dotcom down the road. Pay £1000.

Secure deal with obscure German publisher. Miss a turn.

Respectable publisher expresses interest! Pay £20,000 to create early tech demo.

Game canned by publisher! Roll a 6 to find a new backer, or return to the start…

PAY DAY






Glance at games charts from any year over the past 20, and absent friends stare back. A decade ago, Sensible Software launched its seminal *Sensible Soccer*, Blue Sky Productions (later to become Looking Glass Studios) finished *Ultima Underworld* for Origin, and Microprose and Domark published *Civilization* and *Championship Manager* respectively. Ocean and US Gold were strong UK publishers; growing French software house Infogrames launched *Alone in the Dark*, published in the US by Interplay; and Eidos worked with video compression technology.

Two of these companies have since grown enormously, have thrived, and can be viewed – with certain subjective qualifiers, naturally – as winners in the videogame business. This is not their story.

Wheel of fortune

A common opinion is that Looking Glass was not damned by any specific misfortune, but by several factors and events, "… like a man dying of cancer, suffocation, a car crash, a shooting and immolation by angry bees simultaneously," as one forum post **Edge** read summarised. It's not that Looking Glass was necessarily mismanaged; the story of the time before its demise reads like litany of misfortune.

Among other issues, its attempts to self-publish – especially with *Terra Nova* and *British Open Championship Golf* – led to significant losses, while the success of one thirdparty deal invariably seemed to be offset by the failure of another. *Jane's Attack Squadron* (née *Flight Combat*) overran its deadline and budget, and was canned; the promising *Deep Cover* was spiked when investment was withdrawn. With the company struggling to stay afloat Eidos, encouraged by the success of *Thief* and, later, *Thief II*, made an early milestone payment and began initial negotiations to buy the devco. When this deal fell through, Looking Glass used its little remaining funds to pay staff – and with that valedictory gesture, one of the west's most revered developers ceased to be.

Casting his mind back to that May of 2000, Looking Glass graduate **Randy Smith** – now project lead on *Thief III* at Ion Storm – remembers the shock in the office. "Most of us had no idea that we were about to close," he says. "Before 4pm, we were working away, making progress on our current project. After 4pm, we were unemployed. Last-minute deals had helped save Looking Glass in the past, but most of us had heard nothing about the [then] current situation until the company was already closed. Having the company close so abruptly was pretty amazing. You really realise how much you've got invested in your company when it all gets taken away at once – your work, your creative energy, your relationships with your friends and co-workers, your reason for living where you live, your access to technology, your daily routine. I felt a tremendous sense of freedom, loss, change, hope and sadness all at the same time. It was so terminal and absolute that it felt like the day you graduate from school, except that there was no forewarning and hence no time to become emotionally prepared."

Looking Glass employees were devastated,

1.000 "It's not that Looking Glass was necessarily mismanaged; the story of the time before its demise reads like litany of misfortune" 1.000

Share the Wealth

Status Symbol

PS2 development kits arrive! Go forward 3 spaces.

Have a disagreement with an external producer. Miss a turn.

Decide to launch Web site. Pay £5000.

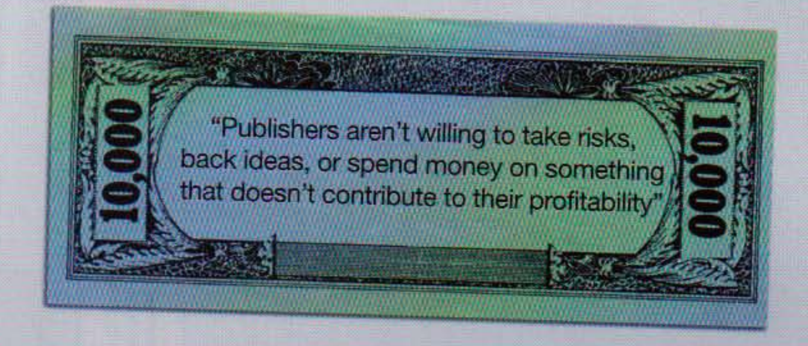
Local devco closes. Miss a turn as you sift through CVs.

Publisher buys big licence for project! Go forward 6 spaces.

First mention in popular Web zine. Move forward 1 space.

Publisher wants top heavy female protag nist. Go back 4 spac

Share the Wealth



their many hardcore devotees almost equally so. Leaving the final meeting, team members posted the news on message boards. In a time frame measured in minutes, the office phones began ringing as the recruitment firms moved in. "I think the closure of Looking Glass, among other companies, makes it pretty clear that at present, there is no room for videogame art unless it falls well within the boundaries of videogame commerce," posits Smith. "The current game industry financial climate only supports the biggest sellers, the heaviest hitters, and the best guarantees. Publishers, for their own good reasons, aren't generally willing to take risks, back innovative ideas, or spend money on something that doesn't directly contribute to their profitability. For better and worse, Looking Glass didn't play by those rules, so something had to give eventually. I certainly hope that in the future the financial climate gets less extreme and allows for more options, but at present those are the circumstances."

Warren Spector left Looking Glass amicably in 1997, after it became apparent that the company could not afford to support the Austin studio he established. Ion Storm and Eidos finance beckoned; *Deus Ex* followed. Was he surprised by the closure of his former employer? "Studios that depend on milestone payments are finding it tougher and tougher to get deals from publishers," Spector observes. "Even when they do, they often find themselves short of funding just when they need it most. The fact that Looking Glass was always at the bleeding edge, design- and technology-wise just exacerbated the problem. It's a problem all developers face and few overcome. So, no, the closure wasn't a surprise. It just seemed symptomatic of something that was going on industry-wide, something that's going to get a lot worse before it gets better. If it ever does."

But did the lack of an nth-minute buyer amaze him, given the company's pedigree? "Yeah, that did kind of surprise me," Spector admits. "I mean, the talent at Looking Glass was second-to-none, and there was some nice IP. I don't know why someone didn't swoop in and try to keep the teams together. Looking Glass had some fairly convoluted deals with publishers, involving shared ownership of copyrights and trademarks and the like. I've often wondered if that sort of legal nonsense made Looking Glass less desirable to potential buyers than it might have been."

It's sadly inevitable that independent companies often find it very hard to hold onto their intellectual property. How many have suffered as a consequence? British outfit Mythos Games scored an enormous hit with *UFO: Enemy Unknown*, with its US release (renamed *X-Com: UFO Defense*) outselling its European equivalent by a remarkable two to one. During the team's difficult time producing its 'true' sequel, *X-Com Apocalypse*, rights to the franchise were sold to publisher Microprose – and under duress, as it transpires. "Microprose thought that we owned the rights to *X-Com*," Mythos founder **Julian Gollop** recalls. "However, our lawyers advised us that Microprose could win the rights if it came to a court battle. There was confusion, so Microprose wanted us to sell them the rights before we finished *Apocalypse*.



PAY DAY

Programmer chokes to death on crisps. Miss a turn to find another.

Get addicted to **Edge** forum. Miss a turn.

Secure contract 'name' PC to X port. Go forwar spaces.

Unlicensed software discovered! Pay £30,000 fine.

Team photo appears in trade mag. Miss a turn to go have a haircut.

Publisher sold to highest bidder! Roll a 6, or the studio's closed...

The late nights are coming. Pay £300 for a coffee machine.

Lose at *Counter-Strike* to work experience kid. Miss a turn.

PAY DAY

Buy official licences for office software. Pay £10,000.

Programmers need new PCs! Pay £8000.

Fudge functionality to hit milestone. Go back 3 spaces.

Move to new offices to allow for expansion. Pay £20,000.



They more or less forced us to do it – threatening to cancel *Apocalypse* unless we agreed. In the end we sold the rights for a small sum of money and an increase in the royalties from *Apocalypse*."

Around four years later, with Mythos working on *Dreamland Chronicles*, a next-gen PS2 and PC continuation of Gollop's previous designs, the company hit hard times. "After we demonstrated the game at E3 I was very concerned," he says. "Virgin was acquired by Titus Interactive, and although we developed the game for a few more months the bottom line was that Titus didn't like what we had done and didn't think that a turn-based strategy game justified such a large investment. Basically, we had run out of money and we weren't going to get any more from Virgin. It was a tough time for many developers. We couldn't find another publisher who was prepared to take on the project."

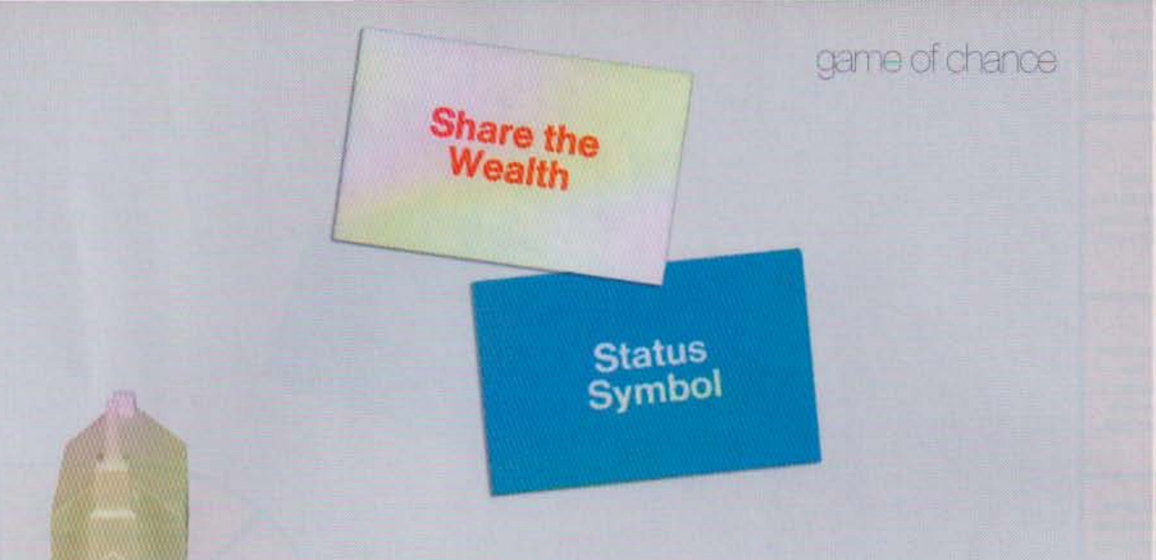
In early 2001, Mythos paid its staff for a final time and *Dreamland* – a spiritual, 'unofficial' successor to its earlier *X-Com* games – was canned. How different might the situation have been had Mythos retained the *X-Com* IP, the previous success of the brand a strong hand to play to Titus or another publisher? The cruel irony is that Microprose frittered away the *X-Com* franchise's reputation with the moribund *Interceptor* and the woefully sub-standard *Enforcer*.

The hyperbole movement

Scavenger, a moderately accomplished Genesis developer, enjoyed a sudden leap in status as it entered the 32bit era. In November 1995, it entered into a written agreement worth \$6.8m (£4.3m) with GT Interactive to produce four games – *Amok*, *Vertigo* (later renamed *Scorcher*), *Into the Shadows* and *Mudkicker* – for the PC and Sega's Saturn. The company's impressive tech demos, attractive screenshots and near-hyperbolic proclamations of coding expertise also endeared it to the gaming press. At the end of '95, 'Next Generation' magazine named David Guldbrandsen, head of technical development, in its list of top movers and shakers within the industry. Of Scavenger's projects, the PC-specific *Into the Shadows* was generally perceived to be the most outstanding of a promising quartet.

Magnus Hogdahl, its lead programmer, recalls that Scavenger – impressed by a demo his Swedish coding group, Triton Productions,



Buy company stationery. Pay £1000.

No one is posting on your forum. Miss a turn while you create fake visitors.

If you have life insurance receive £100,000.

A rival developer poaches your well-respected lead artist! Miss 3 turns while another gets established.

PAY DAY

hares in publisher. a turn to kick self repeatedly.

Play early build of game, and enjoy it. Move forward 1 space.

Playable code exists. Now the real fun begins!

STOP

'First look' in magazine prints screens upside down. Miss a turn.

Release date confirmed. Miss a turn to recover composure.

External producer insists on unwelcome changes. Miss 3 turns.

External producer savaged by bears. Go forward 3 spaces.

Bugs! Glitches! Miss two turns to get your engine into shape.

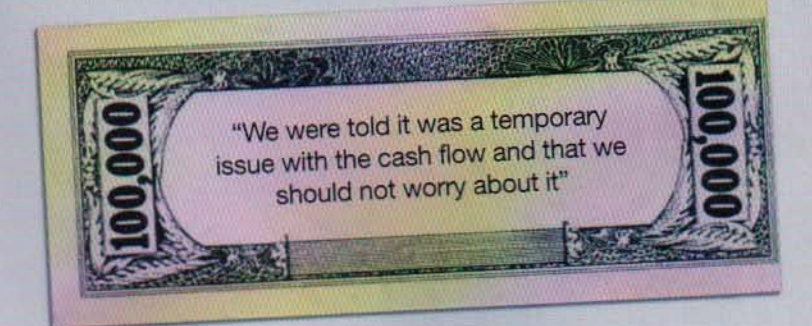
had created – contacted him at the end of 1993 with a proposal. It felt that the ability of Hogdahl and colleague Fredrik Huss could be channelled into game development and, within two months, a loose agreement was in place. After early plans for an FPS that Scavenger turned down, Triton Productions (by then a full company) began work on *Into the Shadows* at the end of 1994. A move to the US followed at the start of '95.

"We were all rookies and didn't have a clue what a game development company should look like," Hogdahl tells **Edge**. "My first reaction when I first visited its offices was that I expected a much bigger staff. It felt a bit like a 'garage' company stuffed into fancy offices. Scavenger had only three employees and four external teams when we arrived. All the development teams had their own company, so the developers were not Scavenger staff. Scavenger was very keen on not letting anyone know, especially its publishing/distribution partners, that the teams were not real in-house teams. For example, when we released the *Into the Shadows* demo, we wanted to write our company name, but it somehow persuaded us to write something like 'Triton – a Scavenger team'. Considering there was no development contract between the two companies, this is quite interesting."

High hopes

After receiving acclaim at 1995's E3 for early work on *Into the Shadows*, Hogdahl initially had high hopes for his putative opus. However, with only one full-time programmer (Hogdahl himself), and little tangible assistance from a Scavenger management who expressed no interest in expanding the team, he began to harbour reservations. By early '96, *Into the Shadows* had basic functionality: it was possible to fight AI monsters and explore simple levels. That said, many features and most of the content had yet to be implemented. A release that year, as was originally planned, was simply not going to happen. And nor, indeed, was there sign of *any* kind of launch, as Hogdahl soon discovered.

"We didn't get paid. That is a pretty strong sign," he grimaces. "Then we started hearing rumours about Scavenger's Denmark offices, that it didn't have any funds to pay its teams or its office rent. We were told it was a temporary issue with the cash flow and that we should not worry about it. We started pushing for getting a contract drawn up. Eventually we got a proposal from Scavenger, but even we could see that something was wrong with it. We consulted a lawyer with good knowledge of the games business. This was a real eye-opener. We were basically told we'd been played, and how things should be done, and that the contract proposal was ridiculous. After this shock we left its offices and moved back to Sweden. We negotiated the contract for a few







Roll a 6 to restore office morale after departures.

Get addicted to **Edge** forum. Miss a turn.

If you have life insurance receive £100,000.

Publisher announces impressive promotional budget. Go forward 2 places.

Share the Wealth

Status Symbol

Publisher announces impressive PR budget. Go forward 2 places.

Publisher promises TV advertising. Move forward 1 space.

Late alpha leaked onto the Internet. Miss 3 turns to find the culprit.

Make wild claims in an interview. Miss a turn to cringe.

You've hit beta! Pick up a cheque, and prepare for adversity...

Vaguely critical preview in 'unofficial' magazine! Miss a turn to seethe.

Slavish rewrite of PR script in official mag. Go forward 1 step.

STOP! Roll a 6 to go up. Otherwise, carry on to the right.

Realise that ostensibly playable code is bug infested. Miss 4 turns.

PAY DAY

PAY DAY

months until Scavenger suddenly fell silent, some time fall '96."

Little more than two years after its glorious 1995, its deal terminated for alleged breach of contract, its staff disbanded, the empty husk of Scavenger engaged in litigation with GT Interactive for unpaid milestones and extensive damages. *Into the Shadows* and *Mudkicker* were stillborn, *Amok* and *Scorcher* critical and commercial failures.

GTI argued that Scavenger had failed to both deliver the promised titles on time, and to the promised standard; Scavenger contested that, having published *Amok* and *Scorcher*, GT's refusal to pay outstanding royalties had precluded the possibility of completing the two final titles – essentially killing the company. A stipulation of discontinuance was eventually filed earlier this year, following a 'nominal' settlement from GT owner Infogrames – a far cry from the punitive damages once sought by Scavenger, reportedly between $60m to $100m (£37.8m–£63m).

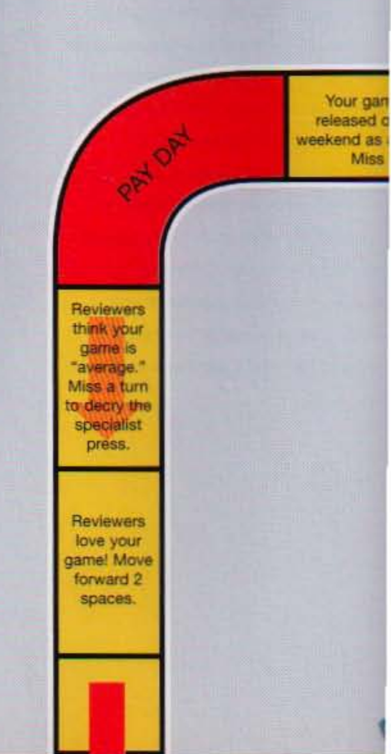
A little imagination

The story of Imagine, explored in detail in this issue's Making Of... *Bandersnatch* (see p106), is certainly relevant here. Although titles such as *Arcadia* initially bought the 8bit publisher a modicum of financial security, mismanagement, in-fighting, incredible overconfidence and a lack of worthwhile games led to its ignoble implosion. When, in early 1984, director Paul Anderson sought a computer games company to appear in an episode of BBC's 'Commercial Breaks' series – documentaries focusing on the trials and tribulations faced by pioneering entrepreneurs – Imagine seemed the perfect candidate.

With its slick advertising, tireless self-promotion by playboy management and a young staff of over 100 individuals, the Liverpudlian software house was apparently thriving. How many other publishers of the time could boast newspaper coverage of 16-year-old programming prodigies – in this instance, Eugene Evans – earning £35,000pa and owning a sports car they were too young to drive? What's more, the company was embarking upon a huge project: the so-called Mega Games, cutting-edge Spectrum and C64 titles that would require hardware add-ons to support hitherto impossible technical feats.

Astonishingly, the *real* Imagine that lay behind this PR-created façade was a castle made of straw; the truth behind the illusions made the company's spin seem almost prosaic by comparison. Imagine was arguably doomed in late 1983, when its management hatched and implemented what must have seemed a cunning ploy – booking the entire capacity of the Kiltdale facility, then the biggest duplication plant for tape-based software in the UK, for the all-important Christmas period. The unforeseen conclusion was vast amounts of stock that Imagine simply could not sell. Furthermore, games stores were bloated with mediocre titles that their owners were forced to price at a loss.

50.000 "How many other publishers of the time could boast newspaper coverage of 16-year-old programming prodigies" 50.000





The remaining 60-odd staff sat around watching videos, playing games and engaging in fire extinguisher fights until the bailiffs arrived. Allegations and rumours of asset stripping and outright impropriety followed. It was later reported that Imagine had not made a single VAT return in its entire existence, and its finances were truly shocking. Its eventual debts were said to be well over £1m.

A multi-million pound deal with Marshall Cavendish – struck in 1983 with contracts signed in early '84 – fell through when Cavendish, alarmed by low productivity and the poor quality of Imagine's existing work, pulled out and demanded its contributions refunded. The Mega Games were in no publishable state; the creative staff listless and working below their ability; debts were mounting; creditors became restless. It transpired that even the tale of Eugene Evans' disproportionate salary was a fiction.

Imagine's fate was sealed when a winding up order on July 9, 1984 went unopposed.

Enfant terrible

The full story behind the disappearance of the Psygnosis brand – and its mutation from early 32bit darling to enfant terrible of the PlayStation age – will probably not be told in full for many years. The former employees who spoke to **Edge** did so sparingly, and only on the condition of anonymity. That said, and although their resentment of certain people and events was clear, each was clearly proud of their time at the company. What comes across first and foremost, then, is not vitriol, but regret.

"Psygnosis was probably through when its management decided it was more than just a Sony label," one source, who prefers to remain nameless, told **Edge**. "They felt that Psygnosis could be a truly leading publisher, and pretty much demanded to work as a multiformat company. Sony didn't say 'no' exactly, but made its displeasure *very* clear. Ironically, most of the stuff they did were just ports which obviously didn't sell. After [Ian] Ellis and [Ian] Hetherington had gone, there were all those rumours about a

Your game is a hit! Receive £2.5m, and kudos aplenty.

Hardcore gamers don't like you! Miss a turn to argue on forums.

Pirate copies abound! Receive unexpected cash windfall from tips book sales.

Player discovers 'obscene' cheat left in by mistake. Miss a turn to apologise to publisher.

What are your plans? Roll 4–6 to expand, 1–3 to stay as you are.

Your game is a flop! Roll a 6 to find new funding, or go back to the start!

PAY DAY

Time to weed out dead wood! Roll a 6 to restore office morale after departures.

Read glowing report of company health in newspaper. Miss a turn to frame it.

Begin talks to produce sequel. Roll a 6 for funding that allows a worthy successor.

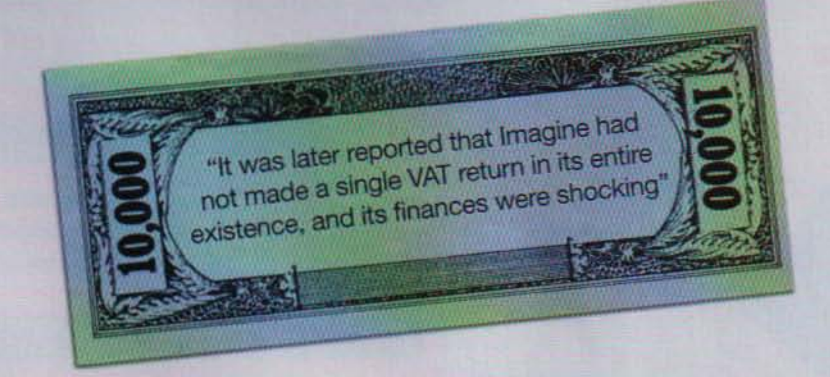
PAY DAY

Discover catastrophic crash bug with gold master at duplicators. Miss 2 turns.

Nominated for 'Game of show' at E3! Move forward 3 spaces.

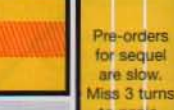
Nominated for 'Game of show' at ECTS. Stay where you are.

Mainstream press likes your game! Move forward a space.



Share the Wealth



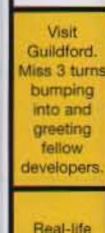


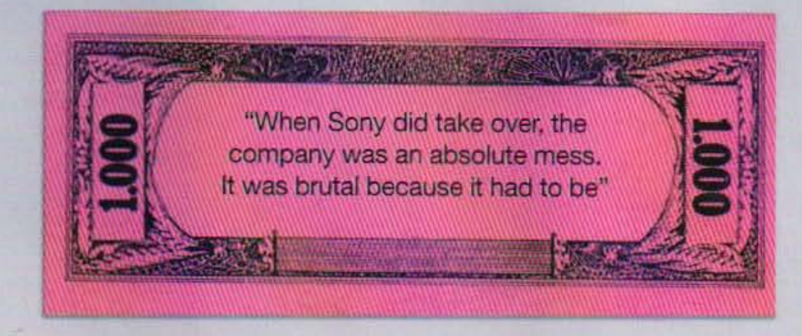
sale. But what was there to sell? When Sony did take over, the company was an absolute mess. It was brutal because it had to be."

Another veteran Psygnosis staffer told **Edge** that there was apparently a certain amount of sympathy within Sony's US hierarchy for the company's desire for greater autonomy. Below such boardroom manoeuvring, however, a once proud publisher was beginning to fall apart. "Historically, Psygnosis's major success came mainly from its external developers – Reflections, Bizarre Creations, Traveller's Tales and so on," **Edge**'s source opines. "But the internal teams it had at the end didn't have anything to match that. Look at [Psygnosis] Manchester. What did it do in four, five years? *Sentient*? At the end, there was nothing of any real marketable quality – games supposedly at alpha but nowhere near finished, and lots of people demoralised. With some studios, the writing was on the wall, and they knew it – others just got on with their games as best they could. Then, one Friday it was Psygnosis, on Monday it was Sony Corporate."

At what point did Psygnosis cease to be Psygnosis? When it lost its monicker, or when teams and individuals behind its best projects – particularly those of the early 32bit era – left or were simply allowed to work elsewhere? The handful of former staff **Edge** spoke to unerringly opted for the latter choice.

Most games companies don't end with a bang, but with a barely audible whimper as their assets are absorbed, staff adapt, flee or are purged and, more often than not, the original label is discarded. Within Infogrames and Eidos, what remains of acquisitions Ocean, GT Interactive Domark and US Gold? What of Probe Entertainment, once infamous hit factory, latterly an Acclaim studio, and now no more? Internal development teams are squashed regularly; from offices closed in the name of rationalisation, to teams cleared as a project ends or is cancelled.





Game #2 met with apathy by reviewers. Miss a turn to speak with PR execs.

'Awkward' programmer quits to form own company. Move forward 1 space.

PAY DAY

Begin groundwork for game #3, and feel lost. Miss a turn.

Secure US distribution deal for game #3. Move forward 3 spaces.

Move to bigger offices. Pay £50,000.

Hire additional staff. Miss a turn to conduct interviews.

Game #2 tops UK charts! Gain £100,000.

Sign first game project by a Czech demo group. Pay £40,000.

Game #2 sinks without trace in North America. Miss 5 turns.

oll 1–3, and your devco is sold to a publisher. Go down. Otherwise, continue right.

Lose devco name! You're now 'studio x'. Miss a turn to rant about lock-in clause.

PAY DAY

Team relocated to another office. Roll a dice to see how many vital staff you lose.

More rows with owner! Roll a 6 to resign, then go back to start...

STOP

Royalties for first game paid! Move forward 2 steps.

'Wish list' design doc for sequel just isn't working. Miss 3 turns for judicious trimming.

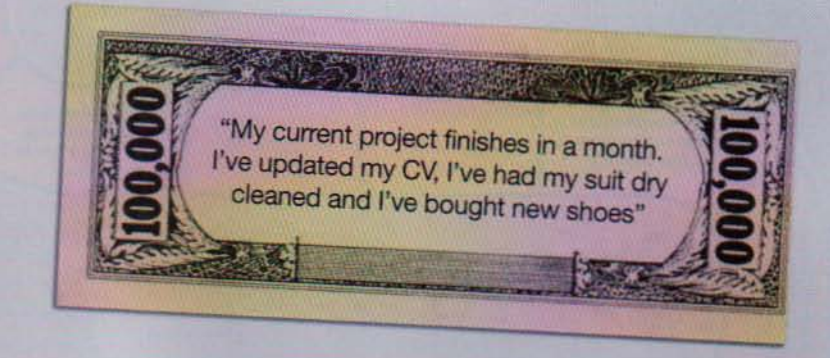
PAY DAY

First game released in Japan. No one buys it. Miss a turn to wonder why.

Missed milestone! Skip a turn to dig into your cash reserves to hire extra staff.

Former coder alleges incompetence on 'fatbabies'. Miss a turn to write reply

Visit Tokyo Game Show with other staff. Pay £6000

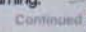


Independent devcos frequently struggle, granted, but a coder or artist's hold on an in-house position can be just as tenuous.

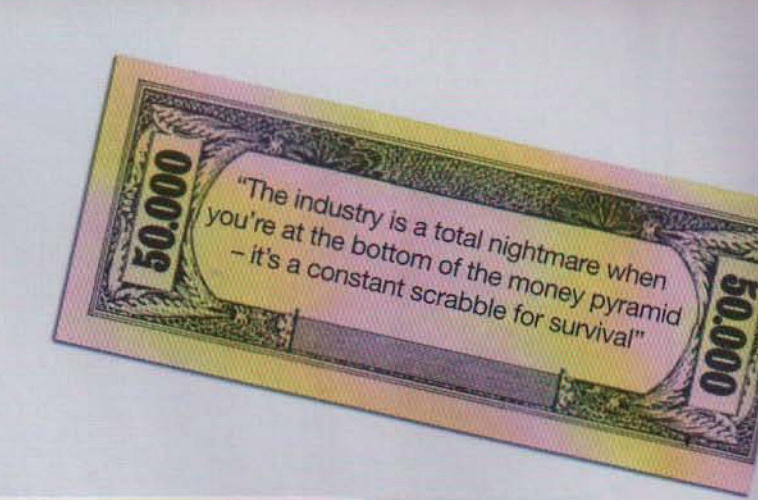
The life of a developer can be a nomadic existence. The exceptional cases such as Yu Suzuki and Miyamoto-san aside, a position on a development team is rarely a job for more than two years. "I've been made redundant twice in the last two years working as a coder for in-house teams at publishing houses," laments former Ocean star coder **Jonathan 'Joffa' Smith**. "My current project finishes in a month's time. I've updated my CV, I've had my suit dry cleaned and I've bought a new pair of shoes."

As depressing (and all-too-familiar for some) as these stories may be, there is a twist. There is much to rue when a Looking Glass closes, or a Psygnosis goes into decline. There is great deal wrong with the industry, how its creative and publishing aspects interact, and how life for small, one-project indie devcos is becoming prohibitively difficult. But ultimately, how many staff actually leave the industry?

From the ashes of Imagine rose Denton Designs and, later, Psygnosis. Psygnosis itself nurtured the likes of Bizarre Creations and Reflections. Erstwhile Looking Glass staff have pollinated the US development industry, with the key *Thief* franchise in development at Ion Storm Austin. Julian Gollop and Codo Technologies are currently in rude health, its debut game – the fine *Laser Squad Nemesis* – benefiting from a pioneering continual development strategy.

On a long enough timeline, the survival rate for all games companies drops to zero. What ultimately matters, **Edge** clinically reflects, is that companies continue to create games that make them *worth* mourning. 

Continued >



Pay 'name' industry luminary to establish US studio. Pay £5m.

Sign deal to buy odd Bemani game from Japan while drunk. Miss a turn.

Obtain VC funding for expansion. Miss a turn to sign life away.

Game #3 is running behind schedule. Miss a turn to crack some heads.

US studio needs more money. No sign of game. Pay £300,000.

PAY DAY

Expand marketing department. Miss a turn.

Early beta of game by Czech team is amazing. Move forward 3 spaces.

Game #3 goes beta, but it's depressingly rough. Miss a turn to cross fingers...

US studio requires more staff. Pay £200,000.

Middle management is growing! Roll a 6 to maintain developer morale.

In desperation, bolt a licence on to game #3. Pay £500,000.

US studio requires yet more money. Miss a turn to meet with bank manager.

Book modest booth at E3. Pay $300,000.

Czech studio finishes game. It's superb. Move forward 3 spaces.

US studio will miss Xmas release date. Miss a turn to shake fist at sky.

Game #3 recoups its investment, but only just. Miss a turn to wipe brow theatrically.

Czech game tops charts... in Holland. In the US, it's stillborn. Miss a turn.

US team finish game. It stinks, and sinks. Roll a 6 to prevent it taking you with it...









Extra features

Additional interviews (as well as full transcripts of those seen here) can be found on **Edge**'s Website: www.edge-online.com

Life at the sharp edge

Co-founder of Binary Asylum, **Bob Wade** experienced first-hand just how difficult life can be for a work-for-hire independent developer. After early hope with its *ZeeWolf* games at the sunset of the Amiga era, work on *Star Trek: New Worlds* led to the codeshop's early demise...

After your success on the Amiga, what kind of future did you envisage for Binary Asylum? How comfortable, financially, was Binary Asylum as it moved into the (at the time) next-gen market?
It was never comfortable. The only comfortable software developers are those who've had a big hit on a good royalty rate and had the strength of position financially to negotiate a good deal with a publisher. So that would be approximately 0.5 per cent of software developers worldwide. Of course what we envisaged was creating fantastic, classic games that we wanted to play and making pots of cash in the process – everyone does, and precious few make it.

What was the project you were working on up to the point of Binary Asylum's closure? What was the nature of the deal?
We were working on *Star Trek: New Worlds* for Interplay and doing a damn good job too. The game was released more than a year after our demise, which was triggered by the publisher's withdrawal of funding. The final game wasn't very good and differed little from what already existed when we ceased trading. Draw your own conclusions.

At what point did you begin worrying about Binary Asylum's future?
Constantly from the beginning. The software industry is a total nightmare when you're at the bottom of the money pyramid – it's a constant, hand-to-mouth, scrabble for survival when you're trying to establish yourself.

Were all members of staff aware of the worsening situation? What was the atmosphere in the office like?
Yes they were fully aware (intentionally so and much to the surprise of certain people we were dealing with, who seemed to believe that programmers are mushrooms – keep them in the dark and feed them on shit) and the atmosphere was as good as it can be when you're all staring down the barrel of a gun. All I can tell you is that I am proud of every single person that ever worked at Binary Asylum and not a single one of the employees ever let the company or the directors down. Unfortunately the company did let them down and never fulfilled the promise it was capable of. Whose fault was that? Draw your own conclusions, I've done my penance.

How did the closure of Binary Asylum happen?
Our publisher withheld a payment, making the company's financial position untenable so that it had to cease trading. If you want more detail than that, come to Bath and buy me a drink sometime and I'll bore you rigid with the unpleasant minutiae of what extremely nasty and stupid people there are in the software industry.

Given the opportunity to go back and try again, is there anything you would do differently?
Yup, lots of things, but I don't have regrets because they're pointless. I had some great times with the people at Asylum and I remember them with great fondness – we really must have a reunion again sometime. I guess the only thing I would do differently is to get the fuck out of it quicker. This probably comes across as bitter, twisted and a case of sour grapes, but life is too short to put up with the bullshit that the games software industry liberally splatters around.

Any other thoughts or anecdotes?
None that I'd care to recount without checking a few legal reference books first. Oh... one last thought... if anyone has a spare £10m (no haggling) and feels like re-forming one of the most talented and innovative development teams never to achieve the fame and fortune they deserved, drop me a line and I'll see what I can do.

The ones that drifted away

Some codeshops are stillborn, some undergo terrible growing pains and some implode spectacularly. But there are also those that merely disappear into the development fog over a number of years. **Edge** takes a brief look at the ones that drifted away…

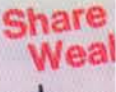
Sensible Software

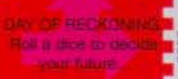
Popular during the 8bit era, Sensible Software was one of Europe's leading developers on 16bit formats, particularly on the Amiga. Its eventual sale to Codemasters and subsequent existence in brand limbo was due to a number of contributing issues. *Cannon Fodder* and its sequel came and went, leaving Sensible reliant on its *Soccer* franchise alone. This too failed to perform as it once had: the death of the Amiga as a viable platform, a moribund PC update and a dismal PS port. More than anything, though, Jon Hare's labour of love – the infamous adventure, *Sex, Drugs and Rock and Roll* – swallowed resources no longer replenished by the *Soccer* cash-cow. With a single derisory offer to publish the title in the UK on the table, Hare canned *Sex, Drugs and Rock and Roll*. The sale of the company, by this point, was inevitable.

Creations

Johnathan Smith was working at Creations when it closed its doors. "Basically, as I understand it, Mike Webb – the head honcho, decided not to continue to personally finance the development of the company's flagship project and pulled the plug," he recalls. "I later heard that there was a deal on the table, from Acclaim, that would have kept the company alive, but this guy had just had enough. I used to work with him many moons ago for Ocean.

"Software Creations going into receivership came as a complete surprise to most people, I believe, though in hindsight there were quite a few signs. Myself and a number of others hadn't been allocated new projects and we'd been twiddling our collective thumbs for a number of months. Additionally, my project completion bonus kept getting deferred to the next pay cheque – though that, I was later informed, was standard practice with this company."





Cavedog

One of the more ostensibly puzzling devco disappearances of recent years was that of Cavedog, the 'adult' offshoot of kids software firm Humongous Entertainment. Its debut game, the Chris Taylor (now of Gas Powered Games) designed *Total Annihilation* was critically lauded; its sequel, sans Taylor, *Total Annihilation: Kingdoms*, rather less so. Other Cavedog games in development at the time were cancelled. So what, **Edge** asks Humongous/Cavedog co-founder **Ron Gilbert**, happened?

"Cavedog was not really closed in the traditional sense," Gilbert reveals. "It was very much a part of Humongous Entertainment in that we shared people and resources, so when we stopped a couple of Cavedog projects it wasn't like we 'closed' anything. We just stopped working on two games and went on with all the stuff we were doing with HE. One thing to remember about *Total Annihilation* is that it was a huge critical hit, but a very disappointing selling product."

Perfect Entertainment

Best known for its *Discworld* games, Perfect once enjoyed a healthy relationship with Psygnosis. When the latter requested that the Croydon-based codeshop increase its staff to cope with a promised influx of conversion projects – on top of its original productions – the devco gladly complied, and work began. Psygnosis subsequently pulled the plug. With costly new teams and no work to give them, Perfect was forced to take legal action.

Unfortunately, the response of their former employers was to freeze royalty payments, leaving Perfect with a trickle of income for a protracted period. In no fit state for a long battle, it was forced to accept an apparently meagre out-of-court settlement. Too little to save the company, Perfect was forced to close its doors.



GLOBAL UNDERGROUND



Nine out of every ten games we buy were created in Japan, the US or the UK, but this hasn't stopped a global boom in game studios in recent years. **Edge** charts their progress in offering an alternative to the development superpowers

Between them, the UK, US and Japan are the countries of origin for 90 per cent of all videogames. This territorial stranglehold has been responsible for almost every game of importance since the dawn of videogaming and, in many ways, has shaped our preconceptions about what a videogame ought to be. But what about the ten per cent of games produced outside of this development axis?

Edge went on a globetrotting excercise to find out what's happening on the frontiers of game development. In the next few pages we root out the games that excite Argentine gamers, explore India's potential as a gaming superpower, witness gaming's broadband future in Korea and uncover some of the titles that haven't even reached the UK on import.

continued >

THE AMERICAS

From the high-profile developers of Canada to the emerging developers of South America, the American continents represent the extremes of the industry – the well established and the barely-out-of-the-bedroom developer…

CANADA

Population	31.08m
PC ownership	12m
Average yearly income	$22,778

Canada boasts some of the world's top development talent including Digital Extremes (*Unreal Tournament*) and EA Canada (*SSX Tricky*) and accounts for four per cent of all games sold in the US. But publishers tend to see the country as just another part of the US market and Canada-only games are simply non-existent.

Kirk Owen, president of Octagon Entertainment (a Canadian agency for development talent), admits that while Canadians are keen to distinguish themselves from the US this has yet to come across in Canadian games. "While say French, German and Asian games do seem to have their own style, it is hard to differentiate between Canadian, American and British games," he says.





SSX *Tricky* (top) and *Unreal Championship* (above) prove that Canada is a hotbed of coding activity. Understandably, however, the games are indistinguishable from US product

COSTA RICA

Population	3.81m
PC ownership	700,000
Average yearly income	$3,964

Small, inconsequential and probably unlocatable for many, the Central American nation of Costa Rica hardly springs to mind as a port of call for development talent. However Marte Studios is hoping to change all that with its forthcoming debut *Khan-An-Thar*. "There are other animation firms here but we're the only ones doing a game," explains **Oliver Zúñiga**, Marte's special effects director, "And as such the industry is very young even though there is a lot of talent here."

Funded by Marte's animation work, *Khan-An-Thar* is only a matter of months into development and the team has yet to start canvassing would-be publishers. "We are concentrating on getting the animation right at the moment," says Zúñiga. "In the game the player rides a huge beast called a Throng and we want to give the player the feeling of riding such a massive creature. The creature is very strong, extremely heavy and amazingly powerful and we want to convey that to the player as far too many games don't do this well at all."

The game takes place in a parallel world where two warring civilisations are being threatened by a common enemy. The task for the player is to first unite the two civilisations and then help them defeat the common threat.

Given that Costa Rica's population is smaller than that of Ireland the domestic market for games is fairly small and thanks to high prices and piracy, there's little incentive to write games for the home market. As such *Khan-An-Thar* is being written with a global audience in mind.



Marte Studios' novel *Khan-An-Thar* is a rare game coming out of Costa Rica. It is hoped that it will sell to a global audience

BRAZIL

Population	169.54m
PC ownership	10.8m
Average yearly income	$3,484

"The game industry here is currently in a boom," says **Alexandre Vrubel**, development manager for developers Continuum. "There's been several companies being founded recently and professional courses are being created. We think the game industry is starting to flourish here."

Vrubel may well be right. Brazil has long remained an unknown quantity in gaming and only recently have homegrown titles begun to get released worldwide. Continuum was first through the door in 2001 when Take 2 published its RTS *Outlive* and Southlogic has followed suit with Infogrames' *Deer Hunter*-clone *Trophy Hunter*.

However, Brazil game releases face overwhelming levels of piracy and megahit games such as *FIFA* sell about 100,000 copies while smaller hits muster just 40,000. The piracy problem has inspired some Brazilian companies to shift their products online. Jynx Playware, currently working on football management title *FutSim*, is one such firm. "Piracy of CD games is around 99 per cent, the online model offers us more control over our product and lessens the impact of piracy," explains **Jefferson Valadares**, creative director at Jynx.

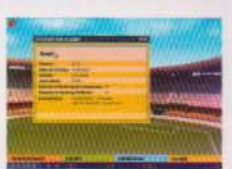
Advergames are an important source of development income and developers such as Jynx and LocZ rely heavily on producing promotional titles for the likes of VW Trail, Volkswagen's Brazilian wing. Elsewhere games based on TV licences can prove successful in Brazil's PC-dominated market. Continuum's *Big Brother Brasil* title has clocked up 40,000 copies and is set for release in Mexico by Ubi Soft.

Games offering a taste of Brazilian life are few and far between. Beyond hobbyist releases such as *Favela*, a *Half-Life* mod based on the slums of Rio de Janeiro, there is little available. However, one developer, Ingis Games, is poised to change that. Due to launch in the first quarter of 2003, Ingis' MMRPG *Erynis* is based on Brazilian folklore and mythology. Ingis' **Cesar Augusto Barbado** sees the use of Brazilian mythology as an antidote to the clichés of the genre. "We feel that the RPG genre has too much focus on European mythology," he explains. "We wanted to bring some new blood and elements to RPGs and decided to use the creatures and stories of Brazilian mythology, which itself is a mix of Brazilian Indian, European and African cultures."

Among the creatures are Corpo Seco ("A person so evil in life neither the earth or worms accept his body, forcing him to wander as the living dead," explains Barbado) and Lebatut (a huge beast with one eye, round feet and long wild hair).







The MMRPG, *Erynis* (top left), the *Half-Life* mod, *Favela* (top right) and *FutSim* (left) prove that there's a good deal of coding diversity in Brazil



PERU

Population	27.48m
PC ownership	1.25m
Average yearly income	$2,085

Although homegrown games are rare, a recent political scandal did inspire Peruvian news magazine 'Caretas' to publish a PC game based on the affair. The result is *Vladigame*, a 2D shoot 'em up satirising the scandal that forced President Alberto Fujimori to resign. The political row erupted after a videotape allegedly showing government spy chief Vladimiro Montesinos handing $15,000 to an opposition congressman in the hope of getting him to join the ruling party and thereby giving them a parliamentary majority.

In the game the key politicians caught up in the scandal are portrayed as witches and dragons for the game's hero, Niko Judo, to blast into oblivion. Since it appeared in May more than 10,000 people have purchased the game, making it the country's biggest selling game to date and, like every successful game, a sequel is already in the works.



In truth there is little game development in Peru. It took a political scandal to inspire the satirical title, *Vladigame*

ARGENTINA

Population	31.08m
PC ownership	2m
Average yearly income	$7,678

You could be forgiven for thinking that the economic turmoil which has engulfed Argentina would be bad news for developers in the country. Strangely, the opposite seems to be true, with teams feeling that the currency devaluation which followed the collapse will open doors internationally.

"The devaluation is a great opportunity as it makes outsourcing work out here three or four times cheaper than anywhere else, giving us a competitive edge," enthuses **Santiago Siri**, head of developers Evoluxion, which formed in August and is putting together its debut title, a football management game called *Futbol Deluxe*.

Fellow Argentine developer NDG Studios agrees. "Argentine teams can now offer themselves at rates that are extremely low. A senior programmer's salary is under $7,000 a year now and we hope this will attract international investors and publishers," says **Pablo Zuccarino**, business development manager at NDG.

Although still relatively young the Argentine game scene has already thrown up some 'interesting' products in its home market. Not least Sabarasa's *Malvinas 2032*, a realtime strategy game where you try and capture the Falkland Islands from the British. The rather distasteful propogandist nature of this game was highlighted in the Out There section of **E**107.

Another notable title is NDG's MMRPG *Argentum Online*. Boasting 4,000 users from Argentina and other Spanish speaking nations, it is a rare success in a country where piracy levels mean sales rarely top 5,000 nationwide. "Things that happen in the game often reflect life in Argentina," notes Siri. "For example when the economic crisis caused people to cut off the streets, people blockaded the streets online."





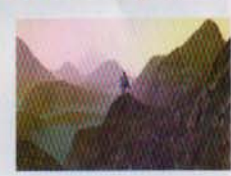


Argentum Online (top) and *Crisis2* (above) are both from NDG Studios. *Mutango* (middle) is a Web-based shooter from Evoluxion. None is likely to be released outside of Argentina









Dark Rage (top) and the MMRPG, *Project Fusion* (above right), again, are from NDG Studios. Evoluxion's *Fubol Deluxe* (middle right) and the rather suspect *Malvinas 2032* (above left) from Sabarasa prove that Argentina is a hotbed of activity

ASIA PACIFIC

With the well established industries of South Korea and Australia and the sleeping giants of India and China, the games market in the Asia Pacific region has enormous potential, provided it can overcome the rampant piracy…

SOUTH KOREA

Population	45.99m
PC ownership	12m
Average yearly income	$9,782

Leading the world when it comes to broadband access (more than 50 per cent of households now have access) and with Internet access bills well below that of the US and UK it is little surprise that online gaming has taken off in South Korea.

Commercial online gaming in Korea dates all the way back to 1994 with the launch of *Jurassic Park*, a text-only MUD. And while online gaming worldwide is proving slow to take off, Korea has rushed ahead. By the end of 2003, online gaming will make up about 20 per cent of the Korean gaming market compared to the predicted eight per cent or less online games will account for globally.

The boom in online gaming has sparked an explosion in Korean online game firms and estimates suggest that as many as 180 are currently doing the rounds. Significantly, though, most have yet to really make an impact and it is companies such as JC Entertainment (creators of *Redmoon*), Webzen, Nexon and NC Soft (current home of *Ultima* creator Richard Garriot) that lead the pack.

Nonetheless, some western releases, such as *Diablo*, do manage to break through and gain a large following. Although the high degree of broadband penetration and familiarity with online gaming are great plus points for Korean developers there are problems. "There is a lack of specialist game developers in Korea and the companies lack experience of overseas markets," admits **Helen Lee**, PR manager at JC Entertainment. "The distribution network for games is also poor and in the future an advanced distribution network is needed."

With so many companies having rushed into Korea's online gaming space in the past couple of years, industry experts are now expecting a period of consolidation in the market as companies merge and buy each other out in order to remain competitive.





South Korean's die for their MMRPGs, which include titles such as JC Entertainment's *Priest* and *Lineage* by NC Soft

CHINA

Population	1,273.05m
PC ownership	28m
Average yearly income	$866

Held back by the Chinese government's caution over international trade in general, China's game developers are only now starting to make their presence felt. Thanks to its British past and special status within China, Hong Kong probably offers the greatest concentration of Chinese developers although it's Beijing's Object Software that has made the most progress in the west.

Concentrating on RTS titles, Object's games, such as the just released *Dragon Throne: Battle of the Red Cliffs*, draw their inspiration from ancient Chinese history. Indeed, the nation's unique cultural history, coupled with a strong sense of identity, fuels much game content. "Our games have a very strong Chinese historical themes. The Three Kingdoms in the case of *Dragon Throne* and in our next game, *Prince of Qin*, the Qin Dynasty," says CEO **Richard Wallis**.

Partly due to its position as the world's most populous nation, the Chinese domestic market is overrun by piracy. China's largest software firm Kingsoft estimates that legitimate games sales account for just $1m for the whole nation. The tiny size of the internal market, however, hasn't stopped China-only releases including pro-Communist titles such as Kingsoft's *Korean War*, where the player is a Chinese army officer. Another title worth noting is *Freedom & Honour*, a three-dimensional RTS where the goal is to lead a successful people's uprising which Inca Gold is releasing in the west as *Militarism*, a Maoist-free rejig.





Most of China's exports focus on the country's grounding in myth and history. *Freedom & Honour* (top) and *Dragon Throne: Battle of the Red Cliffs* (left) both have a military bent

INDIA

Population	1,027.05m
PC ownership	6m
Average yearly income	$476

With 180m middle class people, a successful corporate IT industry and a film industry that out-earns Hollywood, India should be a goldmine for the games industry. But there's a problem. "India has no gaming culture and lacks the social awareness of games that exists in the UK, US or Japan," says **Rajesh Rao**, CEO of Dhruva Interactive, a multimedia firm turned outsourced games developer.

However, several companies are now making efforts to change the situation. One of India's largest companies, Reliance, is opening Internet cafes in 100 Indian cities, something Dhruva, whose credits include outsourced work for *TOCA Race Driver*, hopes to exploit to create a market for online games similar to that in South Korea.

In addition, the firm is looking at customising western games for the Indian marketplace. "The logic is that we don't spend two years developing a game but take an existing proven title and not just localise it but customise it for the Indian market," says Rao, adding that replacing *The Sims'* suburban Americana with something more in line with Indian life would be a good example.

Elsewhere, games developer Indiagames has dipped its toes into the Indian market with the first commercial game in Hindi, a Pepsi-sponsored firstperson shooter called *Yoddah* (which translates as *The Warrior*), and is about to release *Shaktiman*, a game based on an Indian TV superhero. On top of this Indiagames has recently gained a licence to make PlayStation games and is negotiating for the rights to several Bollywood movies with a view to making mobile games.

Despite the potential revenue the changes are not likely to happen overnight. The launch of PS2 this year has yet to make an impact. One of the problems publishers face is that there isn't really a pan-Indian sense of identity and the cultures within each region of the country vary massively. This presents a problem to people trying to market games to everyone in India and what might be an acceptable advert in the north of the country may backfire in the south.







Dhruva Interactive outsourced work for *TOCA Race Driver* (top) while *Shaktiman* (above left) and *Yoddha* (above right) are home-grown games in a country that still has catching up to do



INDONESIA

Population	206.26m
PC ownership	2.3m
Average yearly income	$723

Home to well over 200m people, the archipelago of Indonesia may be the world's fourth most populated country but only one developer is making an impact globally. Indonesia's sole professional developer studio, the Australian-owned Matahari Studios is currently working on a GBA title called *Magi-Nation* for Japanese publisher Epoch.

Predictably, however, piracy is rampant in Indonesia and illegal copies are sold openly says Matahari's general manager **Glyn Anderson**. "Pirate games cost as little as $0.50 per CD and game sellers don't bother hiding it. I've even seen pirate game kiosks in toy shops here," claims Anderson.



Though piracy keeps development activity down in Indonesia, Matahari Studios bucks the trend with the cute, *Magi-Nation*

MALAYSIA

Population	22.2m
PC ownership	3m
Average yearly income	$4,035

Although game sales are hampered by piracy and high prices (a game can cost as much as a TV) a small number of developers have emerged in Malaysia. One such firm is GameBrains, known for hit Game Boy Color titles such as *Backyard Baseball*. "Development costs are about a tenth of those in the US and that's a big advantage," says GameBrains' chief **Brett Biddy**. On top of this, Malaysia's government offers numerous tax breaks and has even granted GameBrains a six-figure sum to produce original titles, for example the forthcoming music-based game *Dr Sync*, which uses local instruments such as the gamelan.



Due to low development costs, GameBrains is doing well in Malysia. *Backyard Baseball* is just one of its recent titles

AUSTRALIA

Population	19.6m
PC ownership	10m
Average yearly income	$20,298

As any retrogamer will tell you, back in the '80s Australian games and Melbourne House were one and the same. In fact the influence of the legendary softco still lingers in Australia's development industry and Melbourne remains at the heart of the country's development industry. "Melbourne House created a critical mass of qualified people in Melbourne and a lot of developers spawned out of them," says **Justin Green**, CEO of Evolution Games.

But while Melbourne may be the birthplace for the Australian industry, developers can also be found in Adelaide, Canberra, Brisbane and Perth. A change **Adam Lancman**, MD of Melbourne House and president of the Game Developers Association of Australia (GDAA), believes is set to continue. "I think Australian developers deliver more passion for the same amount of money compared to US developers," he says. "Today the industry employs 600 people here and in five years' time I believe that number will have risen to 2,000."

Given that Australian sales account for only two per cent of the world's games sales, most Australian games are aimed at the US and European markets. However, a few titles aimed at the domestic market do exist, notably IR Gurus' PlayStation2 Australian rules football title *AFL Live 2003* and Krome's *Ty the Tasmanian Tiger*, which is based on an Australian cartoon.

Microsoft also recently announced its association with Micro Forté, an online game developer responsible for MMRPG games such as *Fallout Tactics: Brotherhood of Steel* and *Citizen Zero*. Though the company is a relatively unknown outside of its native territory it has been developing online technology since 1985, resulting in BigWorld, a 'revolutionary' system that is said to offer a unique approach to massively multiplayer online gaming. Expect an Xbox MMRPG from the Aussie developer in the very near future.



IR Gurus' *AFL Live 2003*, just one of the home-grown games in Australia. But Melbourne House is still the daddy down under

NEW ZEALAND

Population	3.86m
PC ownership	1.5m
Average yearly income	$13,441

Despite some successes on the Amiga, notably Acid Software's *Skidmarks*, the New Zealand development community has been in the doldrums ever since the PlayStation landed. "Back in the days when top tier titles could be created by one or two guys we did quite well on the world scene," says **Mario Wynands**, acting president of the New Zealand Game Developers Association (NZGDA). "But as the gaming platforms increased rapidly in technology terms during the '90s, we fell behind as New Zealand teams seemed unable to scale up to the new requirements and weren't positioned to grab opportunities."

Despite failing to cash in on the PlayStation era, New Zealand's development community is now hoping for a revival. Wynands' own company Sidhe Interactive is currently leading this charge. Having produced a couple of online advergames for Saatchi & Saatchi, Sidhe is now working on its first title for the current generation of consoles, *Dark Shores*. The game follows the adventures of Fergus who has to rescue his people from plague and famine by trying to regain the favour of the Earth Goddess. Old hands such as Acid Software, whose most recent release was 2001's *RollerBot*, and Blitz Research, creators of Blitz Basic, are still active and the recent creation of the NZGDA should help strengthen the country's games industry.

"People are starting to take notice now, so we are hoping that in the very near future New Zealand will once again earn a reputation for being at the leading edge of game development," adds Wynands. Game sales in New Zealand are small but respectable and *Jonah Lomu Rugby* on the PlayStation holds the title for New Zealand's biggest seller of all time with 40,000 copies sold. As a result of the small market, New Zealand-only games are unheard of.



Sidhe Interactive's *Dark Shores* is an epic RPG that the company hopes will ship worldwide. Developers such as Acid Software and Blitz Research are still alive in New Zealand

EASTERN EUROPE

With an impressive string of recent international hits, the former Warsaw Pact nations are blossoming into one of the world's most important areas for game development...

RUSSIA

Population	145.47m
PC ownership	3.1m
Average yearly income	$1,726

Tetris put Russia on the gaming map some time before the dissolution of the USSR, but the country's development industry didn't take off until the latter half of the '90s. "There have always been talented programmers here, but in the mid-'80s computers were rare and people wrote games for fun and distributed them for free as selling them was forbidden," recalls **Serge Orlovsky**, president of Nival Interactive.

Even after the end of communism it took some time before Russia's game industry took shape around '96/'97. Since then the market has expanded rapidly. According to Nival, just three years ago the Russian games industry was worth only $20m and piracy levels stood at 95 per cent. Now the market is valued at $100m and piracy has dropped to 65 per cent.

Although most Russian developers and publishers are in Moscow, developers can be found as far afield as Kaliningrad (KD Labs), St Petersburg (Creat Studios) and Novosibirsk (Softlab-Nsk). Recent titles such as *IL-2 Sturmovik* by 1C:Maddox and Nival's *Etherlords* have made an impact on the global market and the line-up of promising titles in development suggest that global profile will continue growing.

Russia-only releases are commonplace with games such as Russobit-M's *The Brother*, an adventure game based on a Russian film about a young man who returns from the war in Chechnya only to find his brother has been kidnapped by the US Mafia. Increasingly, though, developers are looking to get their games published worldwide, yet most developers feel that Russian games have a distinctive style of their own.

"We don't have the historical insight into the principles of the western entertainment industry," explains **Mike Fedorov**, producer at Creat Studios. "Therefore Russian games are frequently made not on the basis of marketing research but on selfish fanaticism and 'fire in the eyes' development." **Irina Semenova**, international PR manager for Russobit-M, agrees, "No doubt we have our own style although it is not about snow, bears and vodkas. It's more to do with thoughtful gameplay, high-quality graphics and other features."







Examples of Russian-born games include *The Brother* (above left), *Aztec* (above right) and the recent *IL-2 Sturmovik* (top)

EASTERN EUROPE

(Combined figures for Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary)

Population	64.41m
PC ownership	6.35m
Average yearly income	$4,264

In the space of just a few years Eastern Europe has established itself as a major force in game development, especially on the PC. In the Czech Republic there's Illusion Softworks (*Hidden & Dangerous*), Pterodon (*Vietcong*) and Bohemia Interactive (*Operation Flashpoint*); in Slovakia there's Cauldron (*Battle Isle 4*); in Hungary Digital Reality (*Imperium Galactica 1 and 2*) and in Poland LK Avalon (*Schizm*).

Yet turn the clock back five or so years and Eastern European developers were still making games for Russian Spectrum clones such as the Pentagon and rarely did any games from the region reach UK shores. So what changed? **Gabor Feher**, managing director of Digital Reality, believes the passage of time was key. "I think our countries were seen as part of the socialist bloc and after the Iron Curtain fell, time had to pass before people realised the bad image was no longer true."









Cenega's *Knights of the Cross* (top), Bohemia's *Pohadha* (middle left) never made it out of Eastern Europe. However, Altar Interactive's *Original War* (middle right) and *UFO: Aftermath* (above) are picking up fans across the globe

Although international successes such as *Operation Flashpoint* have helped boost Eastern Europe's importance in game publishing, the stigma surrounding the region has not completely gone according to Slovakia's Mayhem Studios. "Slovak companies are often underestimated in foreign countries yet there are professional quality developers able to compete internationally," notes **Tomas Bencik**, CEO of Mayhem.

Many developers in the region do see themselves as being at an advantage compared to their counterparts in the UK and US. "The cost of developing games in Eastern Europe is cheaper. So we can take more care with the games we produce, spend more time tweaking and twisting them. We can add new features until the game is right and still have the same budget as the average US developed game," says **Martin Klima**, head of business development at Czech developers Altar Interactive.

According to Feher, another advantage is the less corporate nature of development. "We are not touched by big companies here and people have more enthusiasm for making games and we are free to innovate." Game sales in Eastern Europe remain relatively small and, while firms such as Polish publisher Cenega are doing well, the heavy piracy levels of the communist era still linger. "There was nothing in the way of software on sale under communism and 99 per cent of games were pirated. It is still a big problem and there is still the mentality that games are free," says **Marek Spanel**, producer and designer at Bohemia.

While the weakness of the Eastern European markets has encouraged most developers to pitch their games at the international market, elements of the games' countries of origin do remain. Altar Interactive's (also developer of *UFO: Aftermath*) *Original War* includes a campaign based on the lessons about the Russian communist party the team received at school, while Digital Reality has based landscapes in its forthcoming sci-fi title *Haegemonia* on Hungarian geography. Bohemia's *Operation Flashpoint* also drew heavily from the team's own experiences. "We've experienced communism from the inside and now live outside it and so we know what both are like and this influenced the story of *Operation Flashpoint*," explains Spanel.

In terms of games only released in Eastern Europe, the majority are poor-quality, budget titles but there are a few more interesting titles such as *Lost Island* by Mayhem, Cenega's *Knights of the Cross* and Bohemia's *Pohadha*, a children's title based on an Eastern European fairytale about a selfish boy who is turned into a deer.



FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

(Combined figures for Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia, Yugoslavia (Serbia) and Bosnia-Herzegovina)

Population	22.86m
PC ownership	1.2m
Average yearly income	$2,335

Although the wars in what was once Yugoslavia have doubtless held back developers in the region, recent successes include 2001's back-to-basics FPS *Serious Sam*. The game has put its creators, Croatia's Croteam, on the world map years after it started out in the early-'90s producing Amiga titles. Since *Serious Sam* appeared the team has put together an Xbox version, which is almost ready for release, and there's a sequel in the pipeline.

Fellow ex-Yugoslavian nation Slovenia also boasts an outpost of development talent in the form of an internal development studio for Arxel Tribe. Although Arxel Tribe is widely seen as a French publisher, thanks to its French headquarters, the company was actually formed in Slovenia.

The Slovenian studios, which form two teams, are currently working on a game based on the 'Hannibal' film licence. Yet despite Arxel Tribe's long-term presence here they are pretty much the only show in town. "There's not much of a development scene at all in Slovenia unfortunately," says **Guillaume de Fondaumiere**, co-founder of Arxel Tribe. "We are now trying to help breed smaller studios in the country but at the moment we are pretty much alone."





The Slovenian branch of Arxel Tribe is currently producing *Hannibal*, and expect it to ship worldwide sometime soon

LITHUANIA

Population	3.48m
PC ownership	260,000
Average yearly income	$3,039

The Baltic nation of Lithuania has yet to make a splash in gaming and Midas Interactive's mobile phone game division is the only studio of any importance. Russian titles often do well and *Neznaika*, based on a cute but dumb Russian cartoon character, is typical. One of Midas' own titles *MoBuddy* also tows the Russian line. "*MoBuddy* is very reminiscent of the stereotype of the new Russian," says **Ilja Laurs**, director of Midas Baltics. "Very rich, criminal and not a very smart man."





***MoBuddy* is one of Midas Interactive's mobile phone games and has been developed largely for a Russian audience**

BULGARIA

Population	7.97m
PC ownership	361,400
Average yearly income	$1,508

Although other Eastern European nations have scored international gaming success, the Bulgarian industry remains positively embryonic. The first steps into commercial development date back to the late-'90s when Haemimont Multimedia released a couple of PC titles, including *Tzar: The Burden of the Crown*.

Since then Haemimont has swapped game development for mussel farming and the remains of the team behind *Tzar* have, lead by designer **Vesselin Handjiev**, formed Black Sea Studios ("A company which is doing games and no mussels," Handjiev helpfully points out). The team is currently working on a realtime strategy title for German publisher Sunflowers.

Bulgaria's internal market is tiny and *Half-Life*, Bulgaria's biggest selling game, clocked up only 4,000 copies.



***Tzar: The Burden of the Crown* was coded by Bulgarian outfit, Haemimont, before it decided mussel farming was preferable**

UKRAINE

Population	48.76m
PC ownership	920,000
Average yearly income	$639

The runaway success of *Cossacks*, by Ukraine developer GSC Game World, put the former Soviet nation on the game development map and since then a small number of new game companies have begun to spring up.

For GSC, including elements of Ukrainian history and culture is an important way of making its games stand out from the crowd. "We want to step back from the copycat approach and offer something very close to us," explains **Oleg Javorsky**, PR manager at GSC. "We also believe that gamers worldwide are interested in what it's like in Eastern Europe. For example *Cossacks* contained missions and campaigns based on the history in this part of the world and I'm sure a lot of people in the west know more about the Ukraine due to our game."

The Ukrainian theme is to continue in the team's forthcoming title, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Oblivion Lost*. "S.T.A.L.K.E.R. involves the notorious Chernobyl atomic plant which is about 80km from our office," explains Javorsky. With *Cossacks* having opened the door, several other Ukrainian developers have been founded, including Program Ace which has recently finished an as-yet-unpublished children's title called *PhotoHunter*.





Many Ukraine companies have been inspired by the success of GSC Game World's *Cossacks* (above). However, it seems unlikely that Program Ace's *PhotoHunter* will be as popular

WESTERN EUROPE & AFRICA

The African development industry is still in its infancy, whereas in Western Europe it is well established. But where is Western Europe heading now and how far does Africa have to go before it establishes a development community of its own?

ICELAND

Population	280,000
PC ownership	120,000
Average yearly income	$30,681

Unsurprisingly for an island with a population of little more than quarter of a million people, Icelandic games are a very rare sight indeed. Currently the country is home to just one developer, CCP, who is close to releasing the beta of its online opus *Eve Online: The Second Genesis* (see p32).

"We're currently the only developers in Iceland, but I think there was briefly a company looking at doing PlayStation games," says Dr **Kjartan Pierre Emilsson**, lead game designer at CCP, which formed in 1997.

Given the lack of a home-grown scene, gamers in Iceland are used to playing other countries' games and tastes hardly deviate from the rest of Europe. "I don't think a game made in Iceland differs from one made elsewhere," argues Dr Emilsson. "Games tend to be international and I think differences are more on the level of Europe versus the US. American games tend to be more massmarket and less hardcore than European games."

Eve Online's imminent arrival will finally end Iceland's gaming silence but whether it will inspire the formation of other Icelandic studios is doubtful given the country's size. "I can't see many more people doing games here, although there may be space for one more developer," says Dr Emilsson.



A ridiculously small population and a cold climate has done nothing to thwart the development of one of the world's most ambitious online games in CCP's *Eve Online* (see p32)

NORDIC NATIONS

(Combined figures for Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland)	
Population	23.91m
PC ownership	11.8m
Average yearly income	$28,243

Just like the game industry in the UK and US, the Nordic market has seen widespread consolidation which, after a complex series of mergers, has seen PanVision emerge as the region's leading publisher.

Owned by KF Media, Sweden's equivalent of the Co-op, PanVision has released a number of games tailored to the Nordic marketplace such as the edutainment series *Backpacker* and Paradox's *Svea Rike* series, a strategy game based on Swedish history. In addition, Norwegian developer Innerloop, best known for *Project IGI*, has issued titles for the Nordic market such as *Blåfjell (Blue Mountain)*.

More recently, PanVision and other Nordic game firms have been making their presence felt internationally with games such as *Max Payne* (by Finland's Remedy Entertainment), *Hitman* (Denmark's Io Interactive), *eJay Clubworld* (Sweden's Unique Development Studios) and *Anarchy Online* (by Norway's Funcom). There are also a number of promising titles currently in development, for example Finnish team Bugbear's forthcoming racer *Flat-Out*.











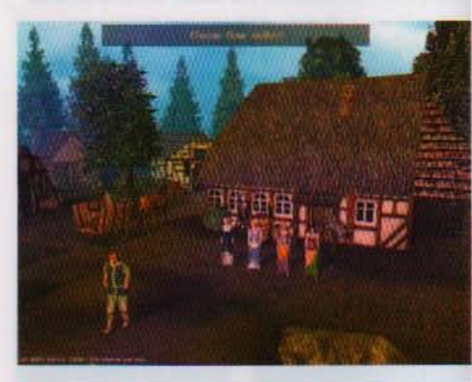
Innerloop's novel *Blåfjell* (top); PanVision's *Rally Trophy* (middle left), *Iron Eagle* (middle right) and *Backpacker* (above right); and Bugbear's *Flat-Out* (see p41) all suggest that a cold climate is particulary conducive to copious game development

GERMANY AND AUSTRIA

Population	90.29r
PC ownership	29.91r
Average yearly income	$22,80

Germany's love of in-depth PC simulations and strategy titles is well known, so when it comes to surprises it's Germany's siste nation Austria that is the one to watch. For a nation whose last major contribution to popular culture was '80s pop sensation Falco, the Alpine nation has quietly established itself as a significant force in European gaming, thanks to a surprisingly large number of developers (including Neo Software who put together the Xbox version of *Max Payne*) and the rapid growth of Vienna-based publisher JoWooD, best known for hits such as *Industry Giant*.

The size of the German PC market, the largest in Europe, has also allowed publishers and developers to release games, such as JoWooD's *The Guild* (the sequel to which is getting a UK release as *Europa 1400*), aimed squarely at German gamers





JoWooD's *The Guild* may be aimed at a largely German audience but it's doing so well that the publisher is considering a UK release under the name of *Europa 1400*



ITALY AND SPAIN

Population	96.35m
PC ownership	18.1m
Average yearly income	$16,741

While both Spain and Italy have a long tradition of game development dating back to the hey-day of the Spectrum, neither country has really established itself on the world scene in the same way that France, Germany and the UK have.

"Italy has always had a vibrant development community but it has never managed to establish itself as an industry. I have seen many talented teams rise and fall for various reasons," says **Pietro Montelatici**, managing director of Italy's elder statesmen in gaming, Trecision, who started life in the early-'90s.

However, with a bit of luck things may be about to change with teams such as Milestone (of *Screamer Rally* fame) in Italy looking set to make a global impact and Spanish developer Pyro Studios (creators of Eidos' *Commandos* series) already producing global hits. Games directed at just the Spanish or Italian markets are rare, though Trecision did put elements of Italian culture into some of its earlier titles, for example 1991's Amiga game *Profezia*.





Although elements of Italian culture did make it into Trecision's *Profezia* back in 1991 (top), Italian and Spanish developers have become more mainstream over the years which is evidenced in Milestone's *Racing Evoluzione* (above)

SOUTH AFRICA

Population	43.59m
PC ownership	3m
Average yearly income	$2,954

Africa's richest country it may be, but developers in South Africa are few and far between and most game creation is down to hobbyist teams and groups. The only South African developer to really make an impact is I-Imagine, the team behind Baml's *Chase: Hollywood Stunt Driver* title on the Xbox. **Dan Wagner**, MD of I-Imagine, admits that getting the attention of international publishers did present a challenge. "It's tough as you have to prove that a South African company can deliver a product to compete internationally," he says.



I-Imagine is the only developer of note in South Africa, but it was responsible for the poor *Chase: Hollywood Stunt Driver*

MOROCCO

Population	30.9m
PC ownership	400,000
Average yearly income	$1,101

The Moroccan games industry begins and ends with Ubi Soft's Casablanca-based development studios. The studio has been quietly pumping out a number of licensed games since its formation in 1998, including *F1 Racing Simulation* on the N64 and *Donald Duck's PK* on the PlayStation2.

Vincent Minoue, director of Ubi Soft Morocco, says the multicultural nature of the country is one of many advantages the 44-strong studio has. "You have a very interesting mix of cultures here. We are at the frontier of Europe and Africa and that helps our artists bring different and refreshing ideas to their work," explains Minoue. "Also the game designers are so happy to be able to create games in their own country that they are the most enthusiastic ones you can find."

Despite Morocco's lack of any professional development history, when Ubi Soft set up the studio it offered training to would-be developers joining the firm, alongside bringing in overseas talent. Although no former team members have yet jumped ship to go it alone it is not hard to imagine the studio being to Morocco's game industry what Melbourne House was to Australia's.

The prohibitive pricing of current-generation consoles means that Morocco's game buying public tend to be using either PCs or consoles from the pre-PlayStation era, although the last-generation consoles are growing in popularity. "The PC market is growing faster and faster and it is the format most likely to win the race as it has a huge back catalogue of very good titles for a fair price," argues Minoue.

Stores selling games in Morocco tend to sell more edutainment titles than games and this is reflected by the choice on the shelves.



Ubi Soft took a risk establishing its Casablanca-based development studio, but games like *F1 Racing Simulation* and *Donald Duck's PK* (above) have sold in good numbers globally

ICELAND
SWEDEN
RUSSIA
CANADA
SPAIN
MOROCCO
CHINA
SOUTH KOREA
INDIA
COSTA RICA
MALAYSIA
INDONESIA
PERU
BRAZIL
AUSTRALIA
ARGENTINA
SOUTH AFRICA
NEW ZEALAND

Americas
Asia Pacific
Eastern Europe
Western Europe & Africa

FINLAND
NORWAY
DENMARK
LITHUANIA
GERMANY
POLAND
AUSTRIA
CZECH REPUBLIC
SLOVAKIA
HUNGARY
ITALY
SLOVENIA
CROATIA
MACEDONIA
YUGOSLAVIA
BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

STATISTICS

Share of the games market by region

North America
Western Europe
Australia & New Zealand
Asia Pacific & Japan
Latin America
Eastern Europe, Russia & Africa

Portion of sales in US in 2001 by developer country of origin

USA
Japan
UK
Canada
France
Rest of the World

Source: International Intellectual Property Alliance

A GLOBAL EPIDEMIC

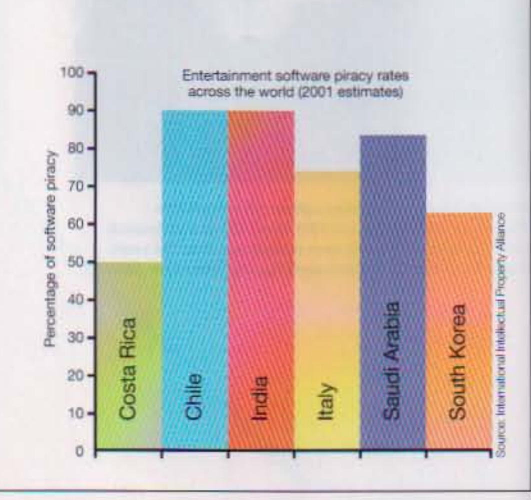
A major part of the problem for developers and publishers outside of Western Europe, North America and Japan is that phenomenal rates of piracy have rendered potentially huge markets unprofitable. Despite millions of gamers, legitimate sales in countries such as Brazil, Indonesia, China and Russia remain disappointing due to piracy levels that suggest it could be difficult to locate a legitimate copy of a game.

The reasons for high piracy rates are complex. In former communist countries, Soviet-era restrictions on trade and non-existent intellectual property laws got people used to free or low-cost black market games and it's a mentality that is proving hard to shake. A similar situation exists in South Africa where the lack of new games due to the anti-apartheid trade embargo allowed pirates to cash in. The vast gap between people's earnings and game prices in countries such as Argentina and Thailand have also caused piracy to flourish.

These high piracy rates have pretty much obliterated the value of domestic markets and in turn undermined their own country's developers who are in turn forced to target their titles at the overseas markets.

Changing the situation is a struggle and persuading governments to crack down on the pirates is difficult. Some developers such as Brazil's Jynx Playware see online gaming as a means of side-stepping the problem and the relatively low piracy rate in the online gaming hotspot of South Korea suggests this approach can work.

But for most developers the battle has just begun and until domestic markets of significance can be fostered globally, companies worldwide will continue to be forced to chase after western markets at the expense of fresh or culturally specific ideas.



The world's most respected videogame reviews

Edge's review policy

Every issue, **Edge** evaluates the best, most interesting, hyped, innovative or promising games on a scale of ten, where five naturally represents the middle value. **Edge**'s rating system is fair, progressive and balanced. An average game deserves an average mark – not, as many believe, seven out of ten. Scores broadly correspond to the following sentiments: zero: nothing, one: disastrous, two: appalling, three: severely flawed, four: disappointing, five: average, six: competent, seven: distinguished, eight: excellent, nine: astounding, ten: revolutionary.

Edge's most played

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City

You have to wonder how the PlayStation generation will relate to the soundtrack but for anyone 26 or over it's sure to be this sequel's most sublime addition.



(PlayStation2) Rockstar Games

Pro Evolution Soccer 2

Stacks of fun to be had from just inputting all the third division teams in Edit mode or taking the perfect free kick with David Beckham. Shame about the mohawk.



(PlayStation2) Konami

Baldur's Gate 2: Shadows of Amn

Note to self: playing an epically proportioned and majestically sculpted RPG is not a wise move when production schedules are only 15 days long.



(PC) Interplay

Kelly Slater's Pro Surfer

The awkward camera certainly ensures you'll experience some remarkably frustrating moments but other than that, this is a rather solid surfing videogame.



(Xbox, PS2, GC) Activision

Showing weakness

Anyone can win with a programmable pad

There's a topic that comes up on **Edge**'s Internet forum (http://forum.edge-online.com) with clockwork regularity. The subjects of the topic differ – words like 'rubbish' and 'suck' and 'awful' are interchangeable – but it's not an aggressive thread, far from it. This is pure self-abuse; an Internet hiding place for people confessing their gaming inadequacy within certain genres. The posts show humility in the face of weakness, and a good deal of shame.

Nobody's perfect, though. Those who've seen the detailed recruitment adverts for **Edge**'s vacant writer's position will be aware that, in order to get a job at the magazine, a breadth of gaming knowledge is necessary. But knowing about something doesn't necessarily mean you're the best at it, and being bad at something doesn't mean you hate it. Obvious, but the point of gaming is to enjoy yourself, and it's possible to do that even when you're – to steal a phrase from the forum – The Suck.

Still, there's always someone – let's call them 'Games Animal', just to represent their lack of decorum, civility, and evolution – who wrecks the confessional atmosphere within these discussions. "I hate to say this," lies Games Animal, "but I really don't suck at any games." Maybe they're telling the truth. Or maybe their field of competition is very shallow indeed, or maybe they stack the odds in their favour or maybe, just maybe, the old maxim holds: jack of all trades, master of none.

It doesn't really matter. **Edge** will happily accept that some of its reviewers love fighting games as much as they loathe driving games, and that some can't stand RPGs but live for the finest platformers. That's the way it should be, of course. By apportioning reviews to those who have expert knowledge of their genres' highs and lows, every game in Testscreen gets the fairest appraisal possible. See, that's the thing: individually, **Edge** has its fetishes, but as a collective, it loves and hates all types of game equally.













Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell

Format: **Xbox (version tested), PC** Publisher: **Ubi Soft** Developer: **In-house (Ubi Soft Montreal)** Price: **£45** Release: **Out now**



The cut-scenes are nothing special but emphasise America's current (and understandable) obsession with terrorism and evil shadowy forces

Splinter Cell's take on tactical espionage action makes no secret of the inspiration drawn from Hideo Kojima's games. Lead character Sam Fisher has the same back-to-the-wall and peek-out-around-the corner moves as Solid Snake; he is ordered around by a guy speaking in his ear; and there is even a level set on an oilrig at sunset – a combination of homage and, given the water and sky effects, aesthetic oneupmanship.

The stealth gameplay is ramped up a notch by new moves and gadgets. Fisher can gain height by bracing his legs against opposite walls and then fall on an enemy, knocking him unconscious. He can vault over stairway banisters and land softly, alerting no one. He even has a fibre-optic cable with which he can look into rooms before opening their doors.

"Failing a mission because the Chinese police choose to blow themselves up with their own grenades is particularly galling"





Sniper scopes are expected (top), but the optical wire (above), that can be slid under doors, proves to be one of the game's most novel and useful bits of kit

Most of all there are the optical enhancements: permanently available thermal imaging and nightvision, which give the game a unique and remarkable visual character. Nightvision has a perfect video grain, while the thermal goggles are exploited particularly well in an eerily memorable set-piece located in a freezer-room complex.

Splinter Cell's main innovation is the complex use of lovingly rendered light and shadow as crucial gameplay variables: if Fisher keeps in the dark, he won't be seen, and the presence of an enemy round the corner can be deduced from the shadow he casts. Shooting out lights (or finding the lightswitch in time) becomes an essential skill. A tense atmosphere is enhanced by superb ambient sound effects.

You begin with a silenced pistol, but soon enough there appears Fisher's multipurpose rifle, which features a sniper mode and a variety of add-on gadgets. Non-lethal projectiles such as the sticky shocker (renders a guard unconscious through electrical voltage), and useful toys such as the sticky camera (fire it onto a wall and pan around to locate enemies) encourage pleasurable experimentation. Frag grenades and wall mines can be procured from incapacitated guards.

Splinter Cell boasts a wide variety of excellently rendered locations – from the CIA HQ at Langley, to a hostage situation in a bloody abattoir, and a fight in a Chinese restaurant – and numerous nerve-wracking scenes, such as following a guard patrol through sewers. Whether to distract a guard by throwing a bottle, to sneak up behind him and knock him out, or to take him out with a headshot – it all depends on the concrete situation, and successfully disposing of an enemy squad without ever being noticed can be highly satisfying.



What *Splinter Cell* does brilliantly is provide the player with a succession of well crafted set-pieces. Although there's little actual freedom in the game, the missions are varied enough to keep you hooked

However, the structure is disappointing. Your route through every level is linear and predetermined; there is no room for independent exploration. And while the game saves a checkpoint every so often within a mission, the only way to complete some sections is through long bouts of trial and error, which becomes murderously frustrating. And if you are unlucky enough to be retrying a part that features a cut-scene, you'll have to sit through it every time.

Use of weapons, too, is flawed. Inexplicably, the targeting reticle for the pistol and rifle (in non-sniping mode) is a green blob which actually obscures your target if you are aiming from any distance. Achieving a headshot often seems a matter of luck rather than judgement, and shooting out lights or security cameras can also feel arbitrary. The over-the-shoulder aiming perspective works well, but when Fisher is flat against a wall, it is impossible to pan his view smoothly all the way round from left to right. Occasional moments when an all-out firefight erupts show the control scheme to be inadequate to the demands of fast movement and targeting of multiple attackers.













Some enemies can be interrogated if you put them in a headlock (top), though using them as a body shield is next to useless – their compatriots will shoot them to get to you







The enemy AI, finally, is extremely poor. Guards who are shot twice full in the chest react simply by crouching, firing off a few more bullets and then standing up again. Fisher is able to grab enemies from behind, in an attempt to use them as human shields, but fellow guards open fire without hesitation, happily shredding their unfortunate comrade, making the human shield move redundant. And failing a mission because the Chinese police choose to blow themselves up with their own grenades is particularly galling.

So then, an *MGS2*-killer for the Xbox? **Edge** thinks not. But while *Splinter Cell* may be flawed, it represents an often compelling and creative attempt to push the genre in new directions.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten





The over-the-shoulder gun view (left) works well, but the targeting reticle is too large and interferes with precision aiming. Expect the usual tedious cut-scenes for plot and mission explication (right)



Take my breath away

The sniper rifle is given an interesting balance mechanic. Rather than leaving packets of Mogadon lying around for the hero to scoff, the game offers a breath meter at the left of the screen. Pull the left trigger and Fisher holds his breath for a few seconds, during which the cross-hairs stop floating around and become rock-steady. Timing when to hold your breath so that you can pull off a successful shot becomes an essential survival skill. Rifle ammo, though, can be very hard to come by in later missions, so you are often left with the inadequacies of the pistol.

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Rockstar Games** Developer: **In-house (Rockstar North)** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now**





Graphical detail is at its richest on the elaborate film sets (top) and in the game's countless cut-scenes (above)

It was never going to live up to expectations, of course. Nothing as hyped as this ever could. But *Vice City* remains one of the year's essential games if only because its developer has listened to the feedback offered by many of the million or so buyers of the previous game, and in doing so has added much to the *GTA* experience.

Most importantly, perhaps, you're no longer a nobody. Where *GTAIII*'s lead was two dimensional, your character this time around sweats charisma. Not only because he speaks (Ray Liotta is mostly perfect as a worldly wise scuzzrag) but because he has a real place in this world: whereas previously you were a relatively inconsequential thug-for-hire, now you carry gravitas, and those around you react to that. In addition, the acquisition of properties, which can generate revenue and also act as save points, proves a tangible measure of progress and serves to cement your position in the gameworld.

"Your character sweats charisma, not only because he speaks (Ray Liotta is mostly perfect), but because he has a real place in this world"



The raft of new weapons that comes into play has already enjoyed unprecedented attention, but in reality the most unorthodox among them, including the screwdriver and chainsaw, are largely novelty items, rendering their inclusion quite forgettable once you've put in a few hours' play. More important in offensive terms is a tweaked targeting system for ranged weapons. There's still no option to automatically move to a new target once an enemy has been downed, but the issue has at least been addressed.

On the tarmac of Vice City's streets you'll be immediately drawn to two-wheeled propulsion, and motorcycle manoeuvres



The flamethrower is one of the more flamboyant weapons, though its range is limited. Out of the motorcycle selection, you'll warm to the racy model over the Harleyesque hogs in no time at all

prove as gratifying as you might imagine. The range of cars on offer, meanwhile, ensures that you're rarely at a loss for something grunty: muscle can be found cruising around most corners, each example ripe for jacking.

Of course, you'll play around with the gameworld and its many components like a child with a new Lego play set before embarking on the missions themselves, which is where *Vice City* really kicks into gear, offering up a diverse selection of concepts within just a short space of time. An RC 'copter level later gives way to more complex, drawn-out affairs where, for example, you're charged with using a camera rather than a weapon in order to secure progress. Moreover, negotiating a passage across the city's rooftops via motorcycle, dropping leaflets from a plane, and travelling via waterways present their own set of unique and rewarding challenges.

However, in putting together all of this, Rockstar North has left visible a number of cracks, rendering the environment of Vice City somewhat broken. Apart from crash bugs, NPCs walk through each other during cut-scenes, buddy AI can be execrable, early chases give you radar guidance while a later one does not – and so on. In fact, in terms of fallibility, consider the following situation: you've become aware of a fracas taking place on the pavement – a group of ten or so NPCs have taken it upon themselves to shoot each other. You watch to see how the situation will be resolved. A police car turns up. Yes, you think, the police have arrived in order to dish out the kind of justice you routinely find yourself on the end of having gunned down Vice City citizens. And then, suddenly, the police car simply moves away and out of the scene. It's then that you realise that it had merely stopped at a red light;





At rare points in the game the action is viewed from a security camera (above left). This particular effect seems somewhat amateurish compared to the polish evident elsewhere









The seaplane (top left) handles like a sack of potatoes and is strangely reminiscent of *GTAIII*'s Dodo. Nevertheless, it serves a valuable purpose. The game includes an anamorphic option and an astounding soundtrack, particularly in DTS mode



it was no more aware of the incident going on at the side of the road than the street upon which blood was being spattered.

Of course, in these respects *Vice City* is a victim of its own ambition, and while pioneers such as Rockstar North continue to push boundaries it feels churlish to criticise failings whose idiosyncrasies can be surmounted simply by playing and learning. (The process will be accompanied by much gnashing of teeth, but the genuinely thrilling soundtrack serves to temper such moments.)

If this game was a car it wouldn't be an entirely new model, but last year's with an ostentatious spoiler on the back and a clutch of other bells and whistles that would no doubt impress passers by. Like a TVR, mechanical faults are evident, but it remains a formidable experience.

Edge rating: Eight out of ten







Targeting, a hassle-heavy undertaking in the previous game, has now been refined, making it easier to pop your enemies at speed (left). Above right: have you ever done this sort of thing in a game?



Back to the '80s

The whole shebang kicks off with an intro sequence which presents a bastardised Commodore 64 screen, with an imaginary user typing 'LOAD "VICE CITY"'. Freaks and geeks will note, however, that the keystroke audio samples do not really resemble the clatter of a real Commodore unit. And, while we're being supremely anal, the Degenatron, a fictional videogame console advertised throughout the game, hardly represents technology from 1986, the year in which *Vice City* is set. (Try it yourself at www.degenatron.com)

Haven: Call of the King

Format: **PS2 (version tested), Xbox, GC** Publisher: **Midway** Developer: **Traveller's Tales** Price: **£40** Release: **November 29 (PS2), Q1 2003 (Xbox, GC)**



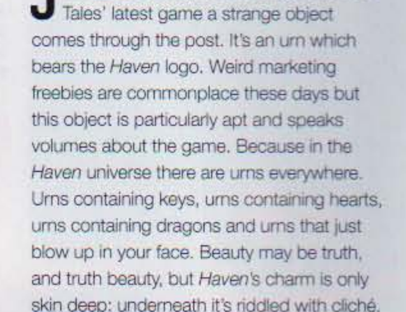
The boss battles are mildly entertaining, but the enemies' achilles heel is usually too obvious, and then it's just a case of retry, repeat. At least save points are intelligently placed to prevent frustration



***Haven* has more power-ups and pick-ups than other traditional platformers. However, too many elemen spoil the game's purity and just clutter up the *Haven* universe. In this case, more is most certainly less**



Thankfully, the game's cut-scenes are short and sweet and, for the most part, they add to your enjoyment of the title



Just as **Edge** begins reviewing Traveller's Tales' latest game a strange object comes through the post. It's an urn which bears the *Haven* logo. Weird marketing freebies are commonplace these days but this object is particularly apt and speaks volumes about the game. Because in the *Haven* universe there are urns everywhere. Urns containing keys, urns containing hearts, urns containing dragons and urns that just blow up in your face. Beauty may be truth, and truth beauty, but *Haven's* charm is only skin deep: underneath it's riddled with cliché.

True, lava levels, mine carts, cog collecting, pulling levers and breaking pots have all been key ingredients of more inspired games, such as *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, but the mechanisms in *Haven* are unsupported by moments of true genius and revelation. For the most part, the platforming sections consist of collecting X number of objects and taking them to location B. There's none of the ingenuity and imagination you'd find in Snowhead Temple in *Majora's Mask* or Serena Beach in *Super Mario Sunshine*.

"Haven has a twist. And the twist is that it tries to outdo Bishi Bashi Special by cramming a number of gameplay styles into one game"

Collectibles are abundant and are generally used to trigger similar agencies on each level. Five feathers must be gathered to call Talon (Haven's mechanical bird buddy). Cogs are necessary to operate machinery, and generators can be powered up by using the shield energy that is spread across the game's locations. It's mainly a mad pursuit and areas are so littered with collectibles that it's often difficult to know where to start. Add to this the blobs of antidote required to keep Haven alive (though **Edge** didn't once come close to running out of antidote, rather rendering this 'key' feature redundant) and you have a game that manages to be too cluttered for its own good.

It's not that the platforming hasn't enough variety. Indeed, Haven's shield and yo-yo weapon serve a number of diverse functions. For instance, you can attach the yo-yo's cord to metallic strips to glide across chasms to new areas and the shield can be charged up to defend Haven against lethal laser fire. Weapon power-ups can also be collected to help take out the troublesome enemies that infest areas. Boss battles also make a predictable appearance but fail to make you wild with ecstasy.

But *Haven* has a twist. And the twist is that it tries to outdo *Bishi Bashi Special* by cramming a number of diverse gameplay styles into one game. There's some hang-glider action, speedboat racing, space combat and dirt track racing, to name just a few. And while **Edge** applauds the effort that has clearly gone into producing such an eclectic mix, it's noticeable that each of these games fails to truly engage. Basic would be too generous a word to apply to the speedboat and driving sections of the game.

Fortunately, *Haven* has some moments of brilliance to lift it above the average. The Egyptian-style tomb levels are easily among the best in the game. Beautifully designed and displaying a rich imagination, they make you hunger for more. The puzzles are ingenious and make the object collecting seem far less perfunctory. When hundreds of

Previously in E116









beetles flood into chambers you'll struggle to escape – it's an awe-inspiring moment. The insects' reactions to torch light is equally impressive. It's just a shame this kind of inventiveness is spread too thinly around.

Visually, too, the game veers from sumptuous locales to hackneyed interiors. Although the little towns by rivers and sea shores are vibrant, they lack any sense of community because soulless people wander aimlessly around and fail to react to your presence. The day/night cycle is worked in well and neat touches, such as Haven doing up his hood when it rains, add a great deal of atmosphere.

Unfortunately, *Haven* is never more than the sum of its parts simply because many of those parts are weak. At certain points you'll be captivated by the experience and at others barely motivated. An ambitious project and one many will find enjoyable for the most part.

Edge rating: Six out of ten







The enemies are robotic and mindless and there's little satisfaction to be had from taking them out. On a more positive note, some puzzles in the game are clever, rewarding patience and persistence



The dirt track racing is one of the most underwhelming parts of *Haven*. It's too easy and compares unfavourably with Amiga games



Friendly dragon

One of the better gameplay components in *Haven* is the use of fire dragons. These friendly beasts reside in fire pots and are attracted by your shield's energy. They can be enticed to follow you over to certain urns that can only be destroyed with their fiery temper. It's a simple, effective and satisfying mechanism.

Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4

Format: **PS2 (version tested), Xbox, GC** Publisher: **Activision** Developer: **Neversoft** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now** Previously in **E112**

There's something rather British about the fourth instalment of the *Tony Hawk's* series. Not only do you get to perform flip tricks to the strains of Johnny Rotten's lacerating 'Anarchy in the UK', but there's also a level set in London, complete with a typically cor-blimey-stone-the-crows take on the cockney skate scene (if one exists).

Structurally, too, the game diverges dramatically from previous iterations and does away with the level time restrictions, replacing them with a more genteel 'RPG' element. Now you can roam around until you decide to chat to designated individuals (they have large blue arrows above their heads) who will then give you a challenge.

Although many of the challenges will be familiar to *Hawk's* fans – for example collecting the S.K.A.T.E letters, performing special combos and hitting pro scores within a set time limit – there are also plenty of more imaginative avenues to explore. Performing ollies over five vagrants, feeding the seals on San Francisco bay and knocking the helmets off policemen patrolling Trafalgar Square are just a few of the game's more creative scenarios. Luge-style races (see Luge disappointment), the ability to hitch onto vehicles and secret areas that can only be found with unflagging exploration combine to deliver a very comprehensive package.

However, there's a major sticking point, the franchise is beginning to feel tired. Although the old magic is still evident – the combo system works as smoothy as it's always done, the areas are even more expansive than in previous games and the skate park editor and online multiplayer games return – there's a sense that Neversoft is merely forcing an old dog to perform new tricks.

Visually, *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4* is poor – next to shining examples of next-gen stylistic exuberance found in the likes of *TimeSplitters2* and *Jak and Daxter*, it just looks like an impoverished geek that's two years out of fashion. For the next incarnation an overhaul rather than a make-over might be needed to keep fans sated.

Although there's lots of joy to be had in *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4*, **Edge** had to ask two important questions to assess its true value: is it doing enough to dispel the fear that the brand is becoming sterile? Hardly. And is it worth buying if you've played a *Tony Hawk's* game before? Eminently.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten









London is one of the better levels, offering ample game furniture on which to plant long grind combos. Knocking the helmets off local bobbies is also fun. A great game, then, but it's simply more of the same





Points are awarded to your skater when he or she completes challenges and these can then be converted into skill points. Collecting cash earns you extra features such as skaters and clothes



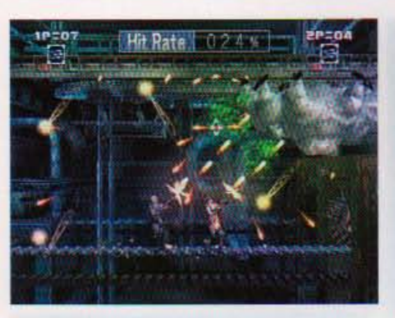
Luge disappointment

Some challenges ask you to move from traditional flip kicks and grinds to a luge-style speed test. Unlock London and you can race a police motorcycle and sidecar (do such things actually exist?) around Trafalgar Square. Unfortunately, poor collision detection, the irritating placement of barriers and control issues conspire to make these segments less than satisfying. Try it without screaming if you dare.

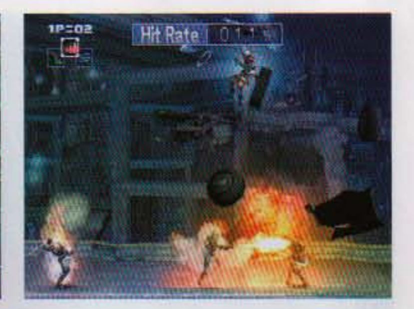
Contra: Shattered Soldier

Format: PlayStation2 Publisher: Konami Developer: In-house (KCET) Price: $50 (£32) Release: Out now (US), TBC (UK)

Previously in E112, E117













Nice flame effects, but otherwise the move to polygons isn't particularly impressive. Still, it's better than the atrocious music and cut-scenes



The Alien Wars

Edge fired up its SNES and got bandana deep in *Contra III* again. The comparison shames *Shattered Soldier*: the weapon system is far superior to this instalment's overly complex model (and the inclusion of smart bombs do much to keep things balanced), it has better set-pieces, the music is infinitely better and, crucially, it's a far more lenient, measured and therefore enjoyable singleplayer experience.



There's little finesse to this game but at least all of the elements that made *Contra III* so great are here. The only problem is that the developer decided to unnecessarily mess around with the winning formula

Is it fair to judge *Shattered Soldier* as a singleplayer experience? **Edge** is well aware of the excellent twoplayer dynamic present in the last decent game in this long-running series, 1992's superb SNES *Contra III* (see The Alien Wars), and a dynamic this latest addition obviously tries hard to emulate. But we are equally conscious of the fact that even in oneplayer mode *Contra III* didn't fail to deliver and the same doesn't apply here.

To illustrate, the time it has taken you to read the above paragraph is a pretty good approximation of how long your first life in *Shattered Soldier* is likely to last. By now your character has died twice and while you're trying to work out who or what got you the second time, you'll be lucky to get to the end of this sentence still in one piece. Too late – two continues now left. The lack of energy bars, quick saves, life pick-ups; the severity and relentlessness of the opposition; and the scarcity of checkpoints (level midpoint only), though shocking at first, does eventually feel rather refreshing. Or at least it would if gameplay had been properly balanced. Sadly things feel unnecessarily harsh, relying solely on pattern memorising (true of most games of this type) but allowing remarkably little room for player reaction (unlike the better examples of the genre) thus rapidly cultivating staggering levels of frustration.

The control system doesn't help. *Contra III*'s delightfully economic twin weapon system sees a third option added (selection is done via the top shoulder buttons) as well as the introduction of a secondary charge-up fire characteristic. You can discharge the latter in one of two ways although **Edge** still hasn't determined which is more cumbersome – having to swap button (from square to circle) or performing a quick double tap (square) in the middle of absolute mayhem.

Yet as a twoplayer experience the balance is radically redressed, the game suddenly capable of delivering moments of near-perfect *Contra III* nostalgia (although you could easily argue other genre examples such as *Metal Slug X* manage this for both the socialite and sociopath in equal measure). The game isn't any fairer but the ability to introduce a tactical element impossible in solitary play and the added social dynamic drastically elevates this from the below average realm it otherwise festers in. So a twoplayer appraisal it is. Those without a games-playing buddy, be warned.

Edge rating: Six out of ten

Robotech: Battlecry

Format: **PS2 (version tested), Xbox, GC** Publisher: **TDK Mediactive** Developer: **Vicious Cycle** Price: **£30** Release: **November 29** Previously in **E111**, **E115**

After seeing sumptuous early screenshots, **Edge** couldn't help but feel quietly cynical. There was always the niggling worry that a relatively unknown developer wouldn't be able to match the obvious visual brilliance of these early shots with deep and involving play mechanics. But rest assured, Vicious Cycle has not only created a beautiful title, it has also produced an enthralling one that does some long-awaited videogame justice to one of the most important licences in the history of anime in the west.

Indeed for fans of Harmony Gold's 'Robotech' series, this is probably as important, and as accomplished an interpretation, as *Rogue Leader* was to 'Star Wars' aficionados. Using voice actors from the original 'Robotech' TV episodes (and providing interviews with them as unlockable extras) and interweaving the plot of the videogame with major incidents from the series itself, the developer has remained brilliantly true to Carl Macek's original (re)vision. And, of course, there's those exceptional cel-shaded visuals – quite on a par with anything featured in *Rogue Leader* and another essential ingredient in maintaining fidelity to the original.

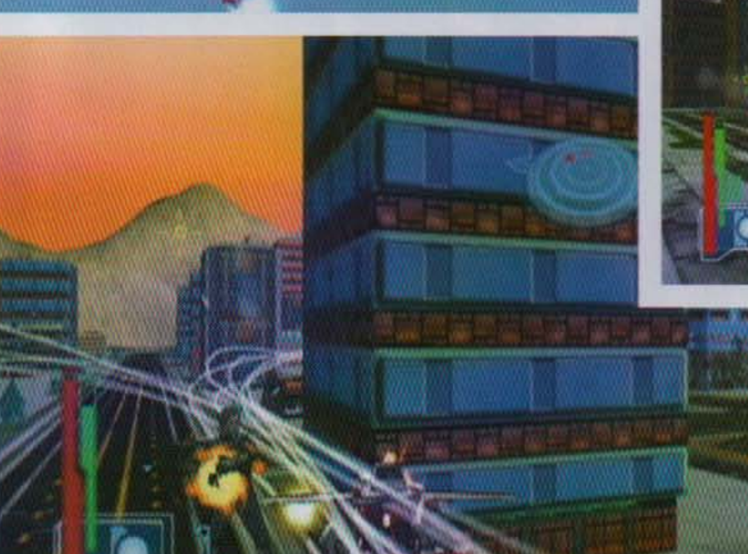
But the two games share more than just an atmospheric recreation of celluloid glories. There are certain structural similarities as well, though Vicious Cycle has avoided many of the pitfalls of capriciousness and arbitrary level design that marred *Rogue Leader*. *Robotech* also introduces a more interesting structure with the addition of secondary missions that aren't essential to progress. Of course, the most significant difference is that *Robotech* allows players to transform between three alternate modes at will, from the humanoid Battloid mode, through the intermediate Guardian mode to the Fighter aeroplane mode. And though the Guardian is initially tricky to control, each mode has a particular set of advantages suited to the various dogfights, escort missions or stealth duties that the game offers.

While it's not the most groundbreaking title ever, *Robotech* is a solidly entertaining one. Even aside from the way in which Vicious Cycle has given life to the licence, the underlying game mechanics and their implementation are sufficiently sophisticated for the title to merit attention – which is just as well given the niche appeal of its source material in this country.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten







Controlling the hybrid Guardian mode is initially tricky, but it soon becomes second nature, and transforming between modes is seamlessly easy





Although anime purists despise Carl Macek's 'Robotech' vision, it remains one of the harbingers of the medium in the west. Developer Vicious Cycle has brilliantly managed to breathe new life into the licence





Unnecessary extras

One of the few complaints about *Robotech* is that the splitscreen multiplayer mode feels tacked on as a sop to a marketing department somewhere. The game doesn't especially benefit from the addition of a multiplayer mode, and initially most arenas and mechs aren't accessible, having to be unlocked by playing through the singleplayer game. And when they have been unlocked, most multiplayer skirmishes still feel somehow unedifying and tedious, and add little to the overall package.

ToeJam & Earl III: Mission to Earth

Format: **Xbox** Publisher: **Sega** Developer: **ToeJam & Earl Productions** Price: **$50 (£32)** Release: **Out now (US), TBC (UK)** Previously in **E**112











The shots above take place in the first hub world; later levels show off all the traditional gaming stereotypes, including desert and urban areas, and play broadly the same but with different motifs. But that simplicity often goes unnoticed, as players will be distracted from the repetition by the characterisation

Actually, it's ToeJam and Earl *and* Laetitia, a third member for a third game in a long-stalled series. *ToeJam & Earl*, a game that was hard to classify but easy to love, instils misty flashbacks in many Mega Drive owners. The sequel, a straight side-on platformer, disappointed. Where the first game was unique, this was part of genre vogue, generic, and gave credence to an age-old saying: never go back.

Ten years later they've gone back, again, and it's with some relief that **Edge** finds that *Mission to Earth* takes the first game as its inspiration. So, our three heroes must wander across themed worlds rescuing 12 sacred slabs of vinyl, and converting rhythm-less humans to the ways of funk. They do this by using Funk Fu musical attacks, and by taking advantage of the myriad power-ups. Each of the characters has different attributes – briefly, TJ is fast, Earl hits hard and Laetita's got more rhythm (see Rhythm action) – and players can switch between them at will in the worlds' hubs, or have a friend play along.

While the original's random world generation makes it to the next-gen intact, the core of the game is the Story mode, in which the levels and challenges are predefined. Levels open up as players collect keys, as do the gateways to other worlds, and the game is as non-linear as *Mario 64* in that respect. In other comparisons with modern classics, it falls down. While there are dozens of power-ups, and plenty to collect, the level objectives lack variation, and sometimes the funk 'em all and repeat pattern gets tiresome. There isn't *that* much to the game. It's not complex. It's superficial.

But, while superficiality could be construed as a negative, it's also a positive, since the atmosphere in *T&EIII* genuinely makes the game. It's coated in Happy-Hip-Hop one-liners, set in a bright, non-threatening laugh track universe similar to 'Keenan & Kel', 'The Fresh Prince of Bel Air', or any number of young black sitcoms.

This won't sit well with those who don't appreciate double-o stoopidity or urban cool, but then it's unlikely they'll be attracted to *T&EIII* in the first place. Seriousness is seriously lacking here, and while the game dynamic is as reductive as you'd expect a reinterpretation of an early-'90s game to be, there's nothing wrong with retro, arcade entertainment. Guess what?
Sometimes it's worth going back.

Edge rating: **Seven** out of **ten**

Rhythm action

Initial attacks are merely a case of pressing the funk button near an opponent, but more powerful power-ups let the characters use a stronger weapon: rhythm. A two-button, two-bar pattern is tapped out onscreen, and then repeats for eight bars. For as long as Laetitia, ToeJam or Earl can match it perfectly, they'll earn money and funk up all nearby enemies. Those lacking rhythm will have to depend on basic Funk Fu, which gets stronger as the characters defeat more enemies, earn more points and go up the Funk Fu belt system.





Falling off the ledge will, naturally, cause the player character to lose some health; islands can be reached using spring shoes or wings

Reign of Fire

Format: **PS2 (version tested), Xbox, GC** Publisher: **Bam! Entertainment** Developer: **Kuju Entertainment** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now (PS2, Xbox), November 29 (GC)** Previously in **E**110, **E**116

Film tie-in games come and (thankfully very quickly) go. 'Reign of Fire' was a spectacular, if flimsy, piece of cinema that pitted man against mythical beast and yet failed to set the box office alight. Now you can play one side against the other in this vehicular action game of two halves.

Your initial role is that of a new recruit in the 'Kentucky Irregulars', a post-apocalyptic army with one aim: to kill dragons. The introductory missions are captivating as you get to grips with a driving style reminiscent of *Halo's* Warthog. It's fun and frantic handling, complicated by the fact that you're forced to shoot and steer using the same targeting system. Once mastered against ground-based dragons and their flying brethren the concluding missions vary between defending units, firefighting and rescues as well as more offensive engagements, leading to a climactic showdown with the bull dragon in London. The variety in gameplay, pick-ups and vehicles, and the constant brimstone barrage, certainly keeps life interesting. Unfortunately, it's all over a little too soon.

Here's the twist, though; the nine human missions won't tax players who get past the unique handling system, so the option to take dragon missions opens up after the first four. While these are clearly based on Kuju's other big success – helicopter games – they make for an admirable distraction. With missions that include destroying London and a dramatic rescue of sister dragons on a well-defended train, they distinguish themselves from the human game with alternative goals and playing style. Unfortunately, the dragon physics aren't as well developed as the ground-based action. There's no interaction with the landscape – you simply fly into it. And while the human vehicles are easy to control, the chase camera on the dragons tends to obscure or, frustratingly, completely lose what you're belching flames at.

Initially, *Reign of Fire* is highly addictive, and just as you're sensing its limits it distracts you with another play mode. The only problem is that the game only ever varies between two poles: either careen around shooting on the deck, or flap (often haplessly) about in the sky. Film sequences forming cut-scenes between missions try to remind us that this is about the film, but you never really escape the feeling that it's a driving/flying sim that's been given a scaly, 'Mad Max'-style spit and polish.

Edge rating: Six out of ten







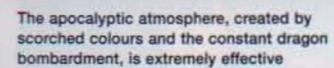
The apocalyptic atmosphere, created by scorched colours and the constant dragon bombardment, is extremely effective





The array of missions that let you take to the skies as a dragon are a welcome change when they arrive. Destroying humans with fireballs gets tiring, but will surely raise a wry grin while the fun lasts





You're fired!

One interesting aspect of the game is the opportunity to defend yourself and others against fiery death as a human. As you're always in control of a vehicle, and they generally react poorly to being doused in napalm, different methods, including using a firetruck and shooting water pipes and water towers are in place to prevent potentially explosive situations. These skills are particularly important to master in order to beat the final levels and they provide an extra dimension to a game that otherwise would be a simple matter of chasing and shooting.

Mystic Heroes

Format: GC (version tested), PS2 Publisher: THQ Developer: Koei Price: £40 Release: November 29

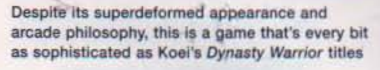
Previously in E107, E112











Despite its superdeformed appearance and arcade philosophy, this is a game that's every bit as sophisticated as Koei's *Dynasty Warrior* titles





Mastering the histrionic selection of rune-based spells is the key to overcoming the countless waves of enemies and succession of bosses



Keep it up!

One of the areas where *Mystic Heroes* differs from the more po-faced *Dynasty Warriors* series is in the breathlessly excited encouragement that you receive from your allies. "Yeah," they trill. "You're doing great," they continue. "Keep it up!" they urge. Which hardly goes down as one of the more sophisticated gameplay elements in the history of the medium. But whether you've just pulled off a sublimely awesome combo, or are fighting for your life in the thick of an enemy throng, it adds immensely to the bombastic battlefield aesthetic and lends an immeasurable sense of charm.

Don't be fooled by the cute appearance of *Mystic Heroes* (*Battle Hoshin* in Japan). Even on the easiest difficulty setting, it's hardly child's play. It might be perceived in some quarters as a stripped down version of Koei's more established battlefield brawlers, aimed at youngsters, but in fact it offers a challenging, and rewarding experience in its own right. And with a main Story mode, held together on the back of a suitably hokey plot based on a historical Chinese novel, and fleshed out with a Survival mode and fourplayer Cooperative mode, it's got just as much longevity as its supposedly bigger brothers.

All of the hallmarks of the *Dynasty Warriors* series are here: the tense battlefield vicissitudes that bring a swift lurch from imminent defeat to certain victory (or vice versa); the need to manage the overall flow of battle by providing your allies with assistance whenever they need it most; and above all, the satisfyingly silly number of adversaries. There are fundamental differences however. For a start, the game is broken up more kindly, into manageable pieces – though these are still fairly long by normal standards. But the main difference is thanks to an increased emphasis on magical attacks.

Each of the game's four playable characters has two rune slots, providing four different spells that can be upgraded over the course of the game, and it's the timely use of these spell types that ultimately dictates victory or defeat. Consequently, mêlée combat is frequently just an interlude for powering up your rune attacks to rend destruction upon increasingly ridiculous numbers of opponents. And to go with this hyperactive combo system, there's also the addition of platforming elements to increase the tonal difference compared to *Dynasty Warriors*, such as a whole bestiary of bosses and mini-bosses as well as some outright leaping about.

Mystic Heroes isn't without flaws. Some of the bosses are fairly disappointing, and some of the level design is just plain unfair. But in general, the ineffable sense of charm, the hypnotically addictive gameplay, and the sheer cartoon histrionics on offer offset any minor niggles in what is ultimately a deeply enjoyable addition to Koei's continued attempt to bring the scrolling beat 'em up, kicking and punching, into three dimensions.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten

Dynasty Tactics

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **THQ** Developer: **Koei** Price: **£40** Release: **November 29** Previously in **E112**

Koei's penchant for recreating the drama of the Three Kingdoms period of Chinese historical legend is largely known in the west due to the company's *Dynasty Warriors* series. So the languorous, turn-based, pacing at the heart of *Dynasty Tactics* might seem at odds with the company's development philosophy. But Koei established its reputation with some of the earliest strategy titles: its development teams are experts, and it shows. The game does everything that should be expected of a turn-based strategy game, but it also boasts a few twists that elevate it above the competition.

All the core elements of a self-respecting strategy game are included. A wide range of units, bearing a paper-scissors-stone structure of relative strengths, form the heart of the game. And these are fleshed out with special units such as builders and heavy artillery operators. Terrain affects movement and cover across the grid-based gamespace, while individual generals bestow strengths and weaknesses on their units and a comprehensive morale system influences the order of play and conflict resolution.

This tactical component is enveloped by a large-scale strategic system in which generals can be recruited, envoys sent out to negotiate alliances and, of course, territory forcefully expanded. Casting players into the role of one of three historical generals, this part of the game is chopped up into a series of dynamically branching chapters based on key objectives, and serves to pose increasingly thorny tactical questions.

But the really sublime feature of *Dynasty Tactics* is a combo system that adds immeasurably to the intellectual challenge. Every unit has a number of one-off special attacks, called 'Tactics' – for example Decoy, which lures an opposing unit one square forward, or Charge, which pushes them back by three squares. By setting up a situation where more than one unit is able to use a Tactic on an opposing unit, you can chain combos together that increase the effect of each individual Tactic. Although it's a simple feature, it increases the game's sophistication exponentially.

There are shortcomings – mainly cut-scenes that can't be skipped and a lack of a free play mode – but these are minor niggles, and hardly enough to offset the satisfaction to be derived from what is otherwise a magisterial display of excellence.

Edge rating: Eight out of ten









Animations can't be skipped, which does get tiring after a while, but this was never going to be a game that impatient gamers would enjoy





Chain of command

Each army can appoint a particular general as a strategist. Quite apart from getting to choose a formation at the start of battle, these special officers also have the ability to use 'Link combos', which adds another element of tactical depth. Essentially it allows them to paralyse an opposing unit's movement, unleashing a Tactic whenever an allied unit does – resulting in an instant combo. This also introduces the possibility of setting up increasingly elaborate combos, and adds a degree of brain-ache to the satisfyingly intricate jostling for advantageous position.



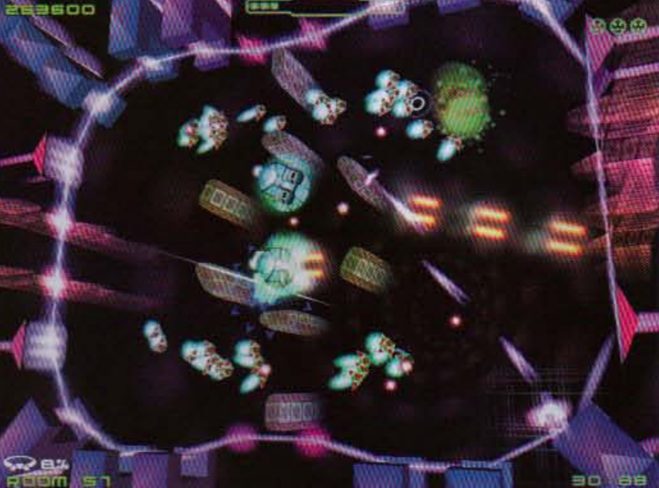


Koei's sublime Tactic combo system requires players to think three or four moves ahead, as well as taking into account the morale and strength of opposing units, which introduces a satisfying layer of complexity

Mutant Storm

Format: PC Publisher: www.pompom.org.uk Developer: PomPom Price: $20 (£13) Release: Out now Previously in E114









Geometric jellyfish and pulsing insects are a staple diet for your guns in *Mutant Storm*. This is a game that knows its arcade history too well

It seems ironic that the most interesting PC game of the last few months should be found in the back-to-basics, arcade-core antics of *Mutant Storm*, the latest title from quasi-amateur developers PomPom, previously famous for *Space Tripper*.

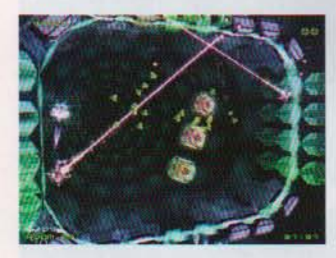
What is quite fitting, however, is that the success of this game, and PomPom itself, hangs on what has ensured the continued creative growth in PC gaming, the widespread availability of the Internet. *Mutant Storm* is available to buy online, download and play, an action that takes minutes for those of us on broadband. It's not available in the shops and, frankly, it could be argued that PomPom doesn't need a publisher.

Mutant Storm is a top-down 2D shooter reminiscent of both *Robotron 2084* and *Defender*, but such comparisons are vulgar when *Mutant Storm*'s own frantic kill 'em all dynamic is witnessed by players and passing spectators alike. The game uses a 3D engine to create its 2D environment: an arena populated with psychedelic bugs and bots, forcefields, gun-towers, alien spirogyra and whirling power-ups. You ascend to the next arena by killing everything in the visual field, and after ten levels you are rewarded with an extra life and a checkpoint to return to later. Every few levels a new form of challenge is introduced or old enemies reinvented, all bathed in a cacophony of old-skool sonics.

There are a number of control methods available to pilot craft and incumbent gun cursor, one of which is the unlikely mouse and keyboard combo. Purists will grumble that only a gamepad will do, but they're wrong. *Mutant Storm* is eminently enjoyable with mouse and keyboard, a method that offsets the initial difficulty with enormous response and precision in play, and it's a game that demands precision. Perfectly judged and exponentially frenetic over the 90 levels, this is a game that requires complete concentration, any mistake you make will be critical and every failure your own. It's never unfair and it's never unreasonable. It's beautiful and traditional without being overly flashy or purposefully retro.

A raw shooting frenzy, framed by the technologies of the PC canon and uncooked by its incessant stuffiness, *Mutant Storm* is a roots-level masterpiece that everyone will feel compelled to play: it's time to have your name writ large on a neon hi-score table once again. And it's been too long.

Edge rating: **Eight out of ten**



Mad professor

Unlike almost any game you care to mention, *Mutant Storm* exhibits intelligent extrapolation of its challenges. Vexatious new enemies are carefully introduced and then reinvented for your surprise and amusement. The constant weight of invention means that it's not possible for *Mutant Storm* to get dull. It constrains play and yet allows advancement in a perfect balance. Wondrous stuff.



The laser spiders provide a particularly traumatic moment of action in the frenetic arenas. Take too long to clear any one room and you'll be facing a swarm of super-hard punishment baddies

The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring

Format: **PS2 (version tested), GC, Xbox, PC** Publisher: **Vivendi** Developer: **Black Label Games** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now**

Another month, another *The Lord of the Rings* game. Unlike EA's impressive effort last issue, however, *The Fellowship of the Ring* shows every sign of having been rushed. It boasts quite a catalogue of errors, including – but not restricted to – strobing scenery, jerky animations, jarringly intrusive (and dramatically limp) cut-scenes, and poor collision detection. But more than simply being rushed, it also shows every sign of having been ill-conceived at the very outset. Indeed it's not particularly clear from playing the game that the developer ever really knew how it was going to shoehorn Tolkien's epic vision into a manageable videogame.

And this in spite of the fact that Vivendi had boasted that its licence, being based on the books themselves, would allow it to produce an experience that was more true to Tolkien's original vision than its film-based rivals. In fact, the infidelities shown to the original text are comparatively minor niggles. Structurally the game follows that of the first chapter in Tolkien's trilogy ranging from Hobbiton to Lothlorien – though certain sections that aren't to be found in the books have been tacked on in an apparent bid to extend the game's lifespan and Tom Bombadil is quite spectacularly badly done (see Ring a dong dillo!).

No, the really objectionable thing is the way in which the licence has been used to sell an awful game. Initial sections play out like an RPG (insofar as aimless wandering and pointless conversations are characteristic of an RPG), but quickly the game transforms into a substandard thirdperson action title in which rudimentary and dull combat is fleshed out by some pointless switch puzzles and more aimless wandering. Boss encounters are comically weak and while you do get to play as Frodo, Aragorn and Gandalf, each is incredibly poorly implemented. Gandalf, for example, has at his disposal a series of spells that are both largely ineffective and visually unappealing.

It's very difficult to find any redeeming features at all about a derivative, bland and badly implemented substandard action adventure title. Even if there wasn't already another, far superior videogame based on 'The Lord of the Rings', *The Fellowship of the Ring* still wouldn't be worth taking a risk on unless you really are a Tolkien completist.

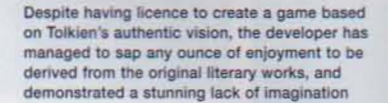
Edge rating: Two out of ten











Despite having licence to create a game based on Tolkien's authentic vision, the developer has managed to sap any ounce of enjoyment to be derived from the original literary works, and demonstrated a stunning lack of imagination



Visually the game is disappointing, but it's the awful play mechanics that really dishearten

Ring a dong dillo!

One of the complaints levelled by Tolkien purists at Peter Jackson's cinematic interpretation of 'The Fellowship of the Ring' is the non-appearance of Tom Bombadil, an enigmatic, but hardly inconsequential character featured in the film's literary source. Well rest assured, Black Label Games has seen fit to include him here, which should appease the pedants. Or it might do, were it not for the fact that he's now transformed into a pseudo-Scottish monstrosity, spouting badly pronounced poetry with scant consideration for subtleties such as metre or rhyme.

James Bond 007 in... NightFire

Format: **PC (version tested), Xbox, PS2, GC** Publisher: **Electronic Arts** Developer: **Gearbox Software** Price: **£35** Release: **Out now**

Previously in **E**117



There's plenty of variation between levels, but the levels themselves are populated by identical guards and a world of contrived and uninspired set-pieces







NightFire boasts the less-than unique distinction of being one of the most predictably generic games of the year. Taking the formulae of Bond, the chases, the gunfights and the ladies, Gearbox has delivered a shooter that seems to deliberately run down a tick-box list of all the standard inclusions for an action shooter. It's a clunky, turgid experience.

It perhaps doesn't help that so many games have copied the ideas from the Bond intellectual properties, nor that *GoldenEye* so capably embarrasses this next-gen game from beyond the budget bin grave. *NightFire* unveils level design clichés around every corner: the man facing away from you, prone for 'stealth actions'; the groups of armed men standing by a row of red explosive barrels; 'multiple' level routes that fail to really add any genuine non-linearity, and on and on...

The PC version suffers even more than its cousins, managing to lose the chase and submarine scenes entirely, elements that actually added cinematic flare to the console versions of *NightFire*. They're shallow and unfulfilling, but they do at least doff a developmental fedora to the idea that this is a Bond game, a 'film' licence. However, this one's a Lazenby.

Edge rating: **Four** out of **ten**

The House of the Dead III

Format: **Xbox** Publisher: **Sega** Developer: **Wow Entertainment** Price: **$40 (£25)** Release: **Out now (US), February 2003 (UK)**

Previously in **E**111, **E**117

Now on to its third mortgage, Wow's zombie family still manages to stave off decay, despite the last-minute rejection of a cel-shaded décor for the eponymous homestead. Most will already know the blueprint of *The House* already, being an on-rails lightgun shooter that places emphasis on accuracy and pace of reloading to see you gore your way through discrete waves of laboratory-bred fiends, replete with atrocious voice acting and discordant BGM.

The only notable changes are the auto-reload feature and Time Attack mode. Instead of a pistol, AMS agents now carry a shotgun, which takes a vital second to change clips, making timing even more crucial. The latter is a *Time Crisis* spin on the main mode, where kills add seconds, and receiving damage takes them away, which makes for more hurried, pressurised play.

Otherwise, it's just more details: enemies are now available in a huge range of varieties, bosses slant more towards *Biohazard* fare than the usual gothic efforts, the opening Chapter Zero swiftly becomes a chore and the inclusion of *THotD2* in its entirety is an excellent unlockable bonus. It's a satisfying peripheral-led experience, if a little unsurprising and uninspired.

Edge rating: **Six** out of **ten**









There are no longer multiple routes available through each level. Instead, players can attempt the stages in whatever order they choose. There are now hordes of enemies to tackle, meaning that you've got to quickly identify the biggest threats and time your reload moments judiciously

Mobile Suit Gundam: Federation Vs Zeon

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Infogrames** Developer: **Bandai** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now**

For anyone more familiar with the big robot oeuvre through the likes of *Armored Core*, first impressions of *Federation Vs Zeon* aren't that impressive. Initially the game's ostensibly conventional offering of thirdperson action feels somewhat stripped down compared to more elaborate examples of the genre. However, this level of simplicity (and accessibility) is actually one of the game's chief strengths.

An auto-aim system, for example, obviates any need for sharpshooting skills, but facilitates easy switching between targets. Consequently, the game's focus is on multi-tasking mayhem in which identifying and rapidly responding to multiple threats is the player's main goal. The result is a superbly enjoyable game.

Campaign mode is fairly flexible, offering action from both Federation and Zeon perspectives and the ability to choose missions of varying difficulty. It also offers significant variety in terms of objectives and environments, with both sides getting their share of escort duties as well as avoidance or mindless destruction, from outer space to under the sea. Which all adds up to an impressive title.

Edge rating: Eight out of ten









If there is a criticism, it's that the pacing of the Campaign mode is perhaps a little too easy, but an Arcade mode offers a more steeply ascending learning curve, and a multiplayer option allows players to take on some human competition. But apart from that, *Federation Vs Zeon* is a very addictive addition to the big robot genre, and publisher Infogrames is to be commended for giving it a welcome European release

MechAssault

Format: **Xbox** Publisher: **Microsoft Game Studios** Developer: **Day 1 Studios** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now** Previously in **E112**



MechAssault follows the likes of *Azurik* and *Nightcaster* as an example of the way in which Microsoft is misguidedly attempting, and failing, to produce resolutely 'console' titles. Developers should feel free to develop to their strengths, even if those are more usually associated with a 'PC' outlook







MechAssault represents a failure to marry the near simulation ethos of the *Mech Warrior* series with the 'console' philosophy that Microsoft seems to believe should underpin the Xbox. The vestiges of simulation are manifest in a horrible lack of control and prolonged reload times, while the misguided attempt to infuse the game with some sort of console sensibility has resulted in overwhelmingly linear missions and entirely prescriptive mission objectives. A more fundamental failure is that the game fails to convey any colossal sense of scale, and encounters with other mechs are anticlimactic and dull – though they do provide welcome relief from aiming at soldiers and tanks on the floor.

It all feels, for want of a better word, mechanical. The game might come into its own when Xbox Live is launched, but it's unlikely since multiplayer modes still suffer from the tedious attritional skirmishes that fatally undermine the singleplayer game. And though it might seem a bit churlish to point it out at this stage, this is hardly the next step in gaming that was pledged when Microsoft was busy underpromising so that it could overdeliver before the launch of Xbox.

Edge rating: Four out of ten

Star Wars The Clone Wars

Format: **GC (version tested), PS2** Publisher: **LucasArts** Developer: **Pandemic** Price: **$50 (£32)** Release: **Out now (US), December 6 (UK)** Previously in **E112**





While the targeting reticle goes some way to alleviating the onscreen confusion, your over-reliance on its subtle lock-on function has the detrimental effect of making it – rather than enjoyment – the game's primary focus 80 per cent of the time





Those familiar with *Rogue Leader* will know what to expect from *Clone Wars* – at least as far as its rigid objective-based structure is concerned. A ground-based vehicular combat game it may be, but the tried-and-tested mission requirements, such as escorting mission-critical craft in conjunction with destroying major targets on journeys from point A to point B, remain as formulaic as you'd hoped they wouldn't be.

It's unfortunate because initial impressions are promising. The opening missions on Geonosis for example, are particularly entertaining. The environments are sizeable and solid, and are home to enough enemy units, capital ships and foot-soldiers to bring a respectable impression that you're taking part in 'Episode II's climactic battle. However, the standards set by the encouraging first mission are not continued.

The smooth, yet ultimately tiresome procedure of circle strafing and auto-locking onto the bungling drones, soon degenerates into a relentless test of patience. So despite its lofty aspirations of being a worthy successor to Factor 5's enjoyable launch game, it's neither majestic nor tightly focused enough to deliver anywhere near the same kind of experience.

Edge rating: **Four** out of **ten**

Pro Evolution Soccer 2

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Konami** Developer: **In-house** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now**

As the title suggests, it's an evolution, not a revolution. The foundations of the Konami football ethic are unchanged. But while EA is condemned for its annual updates of major sporting franchises, most gamers would welcome another *Pro Evo* every three months. Every time a new version arrives it's subtly, yet fundamentally, better. *Pro Evo 2* is no exception.

The key change is the improved animation. This isn't just a case of aesthetics – players now have much more physical realism – they shoulder barge and tussle for the ball, tripping each other, staggering, recovering and getting back in control. Similarly an overweighted pass won't just stick to the recipient's leg, it'll rebound off with unpredictable consequences. Timing, planning, raw skill, they're all more important now. It's such a stunningly rich simulation of the game, it would not be inconceivable for managers to use it as a coaching tool.

Meanwhile, the singleplayer game has been updated, with tweaks to the league system and an in-depth training mode, but there's still no licence so players and teams lack their correctly spelt names. If that sort of thing matters to you then, truly, you deserve *FIFA*. You deserve second best.

Edge rating: **Nine** out of **ten**

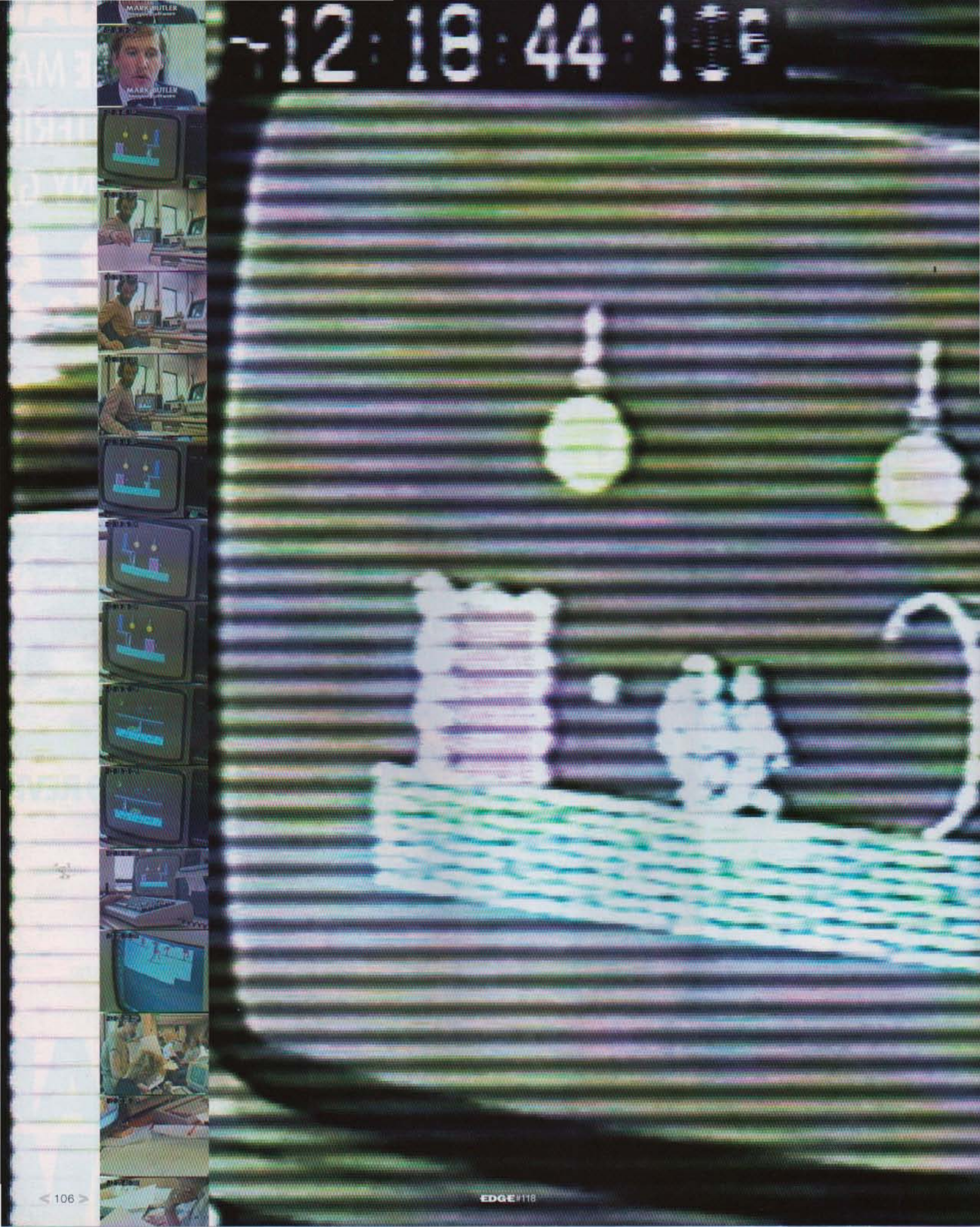








The detailed, fluid animation makes for more combative football as players now tussle for the ball with real conviction. The free kick system (above) has been improved, making it easier to score. And an excellent new training mode (left) allows you to hone your skills even further


12:18:44:1
MARK BUTLER
MARK BUTLER

The making of...

Bandersnatch

It was to revolutionise early-'80s gaming: "Every other Spectrum game will become obsolete overnight," was the claim. But Bandersnatch is remembered for a very different legacy than those who worked on it could ever have expected...

When Psygnosis released *Brataccas* for the Atari ST in 1985, the beginning of an era for the Liverpudlian firm was a footnote to the story of infamous 8bit publisher Imagine. *Brataccas*, you see, was the game that was formed from the husk of code left over from Imagine's so-called 'Mega Game', *Bandersnatch*: the UK industry's most famous game that never saw the light of day.

There were to be two Mega Games; *Bandersnatch* for the Spectrum and *Psyclapse* for the C64. Both were the brainchild of David Lawson, a coder turned director at Imagine. Declaring, with customary ambition and enthusiasm, that his programmers had reached the limit of the Spectrum's and C64's abilities, he proposed a novel solution: hardware add-ons, sold hardware add-ons, sold with and facilitating games with unprecedented visual flair and state-of-the-art design.

Original format: **Spectrum**
Publisher: **Imagine**
Developer: **In-house**
Origin: **UK**
Original release date: **n/a**



The speech bubbles system, such an integral aspect of the original *Bandersnatch* design brief, plays a similarly significant part in *Brataccas*. However, it was ruined somewhat by some awkward overlapping

Conceived at the end of 1983, Imagine began work on its Spectrum-based Mega Game in early '84. Its development team of four was astonishingly large for the time – **John Gibson** (now at Warthog) and Ian Wetherburn (sadly deceased) coding, with **Steve Cain** (Tin Tiger) and **Ally Noble** (Rage) fulfilling principle art duties. *Bandersnatch* was designed as a flick-screen adventure set in an intergalactic nightclub on an asteroid, its buildings linked by glass tubes. Eschewing combat, its gameplay was to involve interacting with various autonomous AI-controlled characters via speech bubbles.

"It was supposed to be a game where you wandered around a free environment and interacted with people, which was unheard of at the time," recalls Steve Cain. "Balloons would pop up with speech in as you did so, and you worked out clues from what they said and the questions you asked them. I can't remember actually what it was about now – I think it was some kind of tale of revenge and murder."

For perspective, it's worth pointing out that Ultimate – one of the most technically accomplished Spectrum developers in 1984, the year of *Knight Lore* – was working on maze game *Sabre Wulf* at this point. "I was working on the engine, Ian Weatherburn was working on the speech bubbles," explains John Gibson. "That was actually quite a complicated idea for the time. It wasn't just going to be set strings just stored away somewhere. There was going to be some sort of system that made up answers to questions. The idea was to make a game that was different every time you played it."

Such features could certainly have been achieved on a basic Spectrum, but it was the much-vaunted aesthetics of *Bandersnatch* that necessitated the use of a hardware add-on. Despite laughable claims in the press that this device increased the power of Sinclair's machine by ten or 20 times, it was actually, Gibson told **Edge**, a fairly simple ROM device of either 128k or 256k on which code could be stored. For the artists, this was plausibly more room for graphics than they had been afforded in Imagine's previous releases combined. "Oh yeah. The more, the better!" laughs Ally Noble. "I can remember doing the animation for it. I must admit, having had all these wonderful ideas about what it might be like, though, the reality of it was that we still only had about 16 frames to do the walk and the run of the main character. That wasn't that much different than what we'd had before – perhaps around eight frames."

The problem, however, was that the plans of David Lawson and his Mega Game team were too ambitious, even with extra memory. "Most of my work was messing around, trying to make it all fit," Gibson chuckles. "That was the trouble. It soon became clear that the extra 128k, 256k, or whatever it was, it just wasn't going to be enough. We'd spent months and months working on it, and it became apparent that the form it stood in just wasn't going to fit in. All the graphics would have had to be redone. Dave Lawson always thought big – he'd wanted big, big, big from day one, and there just wasn't space."

"'It looked like it was going to cost in the region of £64 or something,' John Gibson confides. 'They'd have had to sell it for £64 just to break even. Who was going to pay that for a Spectrum game?'"

Cain remembers this situation keenly. "The problem was that we didn't have the graphics finished. We had all the backgrounds in, all the maps working, rooms for three or four sprites, and no RAM left whatsoever [laughs]. We were talking about putting extra sprites on the tape as well. Some of it was going to be ROM, some of it was going to be RAM."

Looking back at old Spectrum magazines of the time, it seems there was an inverse proportionate relationship between Imagine's health and its claims for *Bandersnatch*. Director **Bruce Everess** was quoted as claiming that "*Bandersnatch* will make every other game obsolete overnight." Its cereal box-sided packaging would contain, 'Your Spectrum' related in its August '84 issue, a music tape, posters, tokens, toys and, of course, the requisite peripheral. The price also increased from the level originally mooted: once £20–£30, later reports fixed it at £40. In actual fact, the final price under discussion at Imagine was even higher. "It looked like it was going to cost in the region of £64 or something," Gibson confides. "They'd have had to sell it for £64 just to break even. Who was going to pay that for a Spectrum game?"

The death of Imagine is documented in greater detail in this issue's Game of Chance feature (see p56), but it soon became apparent to the team that the troubled production of *Bandersnatch* was the least of their worries. "We were the Mega Game team, and we were kept separate from everyone else," says Noble, "but I can remember a really bad meeting where we were asked to leave the room, and everyone else was being given their marching orders."

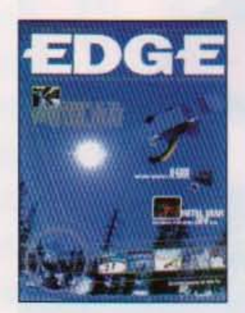
Before long, even the Mega Games team would be out of a job. "The company was in the shit. Everybody knew that it was absolutely fucked, not to put too fine a point on it," says Cain. "Dave Lawson firmly believed that they had some money coming in from the States. There was even talk of us working with Atari. The idea was that Atari would foot the bill for the people on the Mega Games team to go live and work in California. Apparently, at the

RESET

Where yesterday's gaming goes to have a lie down

reload

Examining gaming history from **Edge**'s perspective, five years ago this month



Issue 54, January 1998

Nightmares never finish cleanly, and so a sudden staccato violent violin accompanies **E**54's news section: "M2 resurfaces in non-gaming guise." The new look wasn't a blood stained-hockey mask, but a multimedia machine designed to steal the electronic white elephant crown from the Phillips CD-i. According to Matsushita, the machine would have six main uses, including "interactive orientation" and "real estate simulation." Some digital revolution, Trip.

Revolutions of a more medieval sort were occurring in *Ultima Online*. "Organised marches, drunkenness and bare buttocks were probably not on Richard's Garriot's mind when he designed *Ultima Online*," guessed **Edge**, revealing that Lord British had pleaded for tolerance of the game's "undocumented features." Garriot was pressured into the move by a group of online rebels who, in a protest designed to slow the servers to a halt, headed off to his online castle, gained access to the throne room and, um, drank some virtual beer.

However, the preview of *Zelda 64* was the most radical part of the issue. "Expect something very special," said **Edge**. Maybe even revolutionary.

DID THEY REALLY SAY THAT?

"We are currently working on a system where Mario and Luigi can both co-exist, and they are both controllable by the player."
Miyamoto-san tells **Edge** what to expect of *SM64 2* on the N64DD

DID EDGE REALLY SAY THAT?

"The delicious irony of the West Midlands company preparing the packaging for BMG's *Grand Theft Auto* being ram-raided – and losing 1,800 copies of the game. Life really does imitate art."
Well it does if you're taken in by an Acclaim-style cheap publicity stunt.

TESTSCREENS (AND RATINGS)

Quake II (PC, 9/10); *Einhänder* (PS, 8/10); *X-Men Vs Street Fighter* (Saturn, 9/10); *Mace: The Dark Age* (N64, 6/10); *San Francisco Rush* (N64, 7/10); *Bloody Roar* (PS, 8/10); *Steep Slope Sliders* (Saturn, 7/10); *FIFA Road to the World Cup '98* (N64, 7/10); *Ultima Online* (PC, 9/10); *Flight Unlimited 2* (PC, 9/10)



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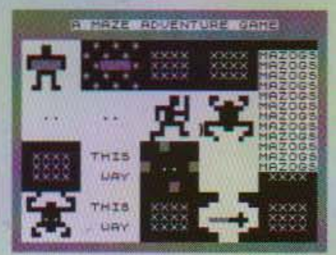
6

1. *1080° Snowboarding*, illustrated with, erm, a sort of wireframe mesh. Or something 2. *Yoshi's Story*: "Another update of a SNES classic." And a poor one at that 3. Somebody's put their foot in it on the set of George Romero's *Resident Evil* ad 4. Kojima-san mixes his colours 5. *Virus 2000*: it's got giant spiders lurking in gulleys apparently 6. *Ultima Online*: enough said

pixelperfect

The industry's favourites from yesteryear. This month, Zy Nicholson, freelance videogame journalist, remembers learning how to make tea





Man and machine in perfect harmony, *Mazogs* was the beginning of a beautiful relationship

Like many teen Brits of 20 years ago, I was under the illusion that computers were fun. How else do you explain an Atari VCS being shuffled aside for a ZX81? I wanted to make games; my parents mistook it for diligence; so everyone was happy, and in those days you could type in biorhythm plotters to prove it. I even thought my BASIC was hot stuff, until Bug-Byte's *Mazogs* came along in 1982.

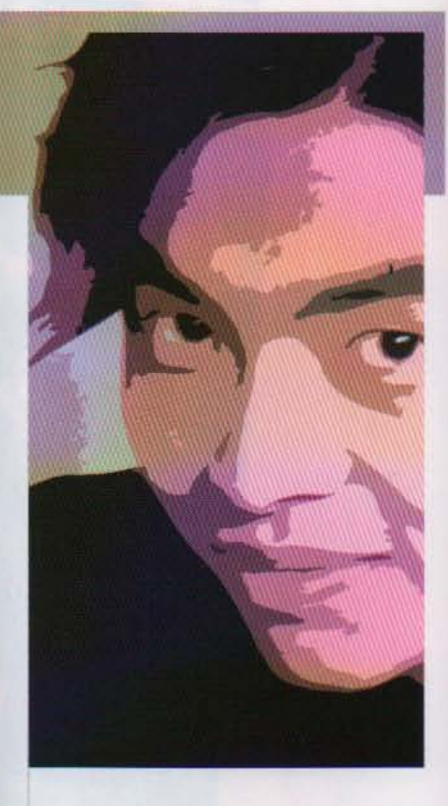
Find the treasure, talk to prisoners for a trail of clues, and escape the maniac mobile Mazogs before you die of starvation. It was an original design, not another embarrassing attempt to squeeze an arcade port into a pint-pot. Imagination pushed the machine to do things never dreamed possible after hundreds of dire BASIC programs. A randomly generated maze every play? Full-screen turbo scrolling around a map many times bigger than the screen?

It even forged those ugly Sinclair graphics into huge animated sprites, when other games expected you to imagine that "<*>" was, woo, a scary mothership. And if not exactly cerebral, it could still induce a panicked "Gerroff!" when those tentacular tempests had you cul-de-sacked without a sword.

Mazogs convinced me to learn Z80 machine code. I've never forgiven it, but I still credit my tea-making skills to its cassette loading time.

FAQ

Chun Wah Kong
lead designer, SCEE (Team Soho)



By the time you read this Chun Wah Kong (whose design credentials include, among others, Psygnosis' much-overlooked *Lander* on the PC), should have (finally) finished SCEE's most ambitious game to date.

What was the first videogame you played?
A Namco shooter called *King and Balloon*. When I was in Hong Kong, all the kids used to call it the "Bye bye kei" (bye bye machine) because a) we didn't know English and b) that's what the king says as he flies off in a balloon.

What was the first computer/games machine you owned?
An Amstrad CPC464 from my uncle, complete with tape deck and colour monitor.

What was the first thing you ever created for a computer or console?
I think I drew the 'A-Team' van on the BBC Acorn computer at school.

What was your first job in the industry, and what was the first thing you ever designed?
I started out in QA at Software Creations back in '93, and the first game I had a hand in designing was a Spider-Man licence called *Maximum Carnage* on the SNES for Acclaim. It was a side-scrolling beat 'em up akin to *Final Fight*.

What's your favourite game ever, and why?
As a kid I spent a lot of time in amusement arcades. I have very fond memories of *Kung Fu Master* and *Double Dragon* which I bought a full size arcade machine for recently. Both games are very spontaneous and very satisfying to play.

What's the first game you look for when you walk into an arcade?
Eightplayer *Daytona USA*, you can't really miss that. If you can't see it straight away you can always hear it. Do-do-do-do-do-do-do-dooo, Day-ton-naaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa...

What's your favourite book, album and film of all time?
I enjoyed 'Norwegian Wood' by Haruki Murakami, and under my girlfriend's influence, I've been listening to a lot of Canto-pop recently. I like science fiction films, especially those that involve time travelling.

Which Website do you most regularly visit?
I visit www2u.biglobe.ne.jp/~nanko/ for all the latest gaming news.

What game would you most like to have worked on?
I would love to work on a Jackie Chan game and recreate scenes like the car chase through the shantytown and the fight in the shopping mall in 'Police Story'.

Of all the game you've been involved in, what's your favourite, and why?
The Getaway, definitely. I don't think we would have dared to do some of the things we did on *The Getaway* if it wasn't for Brendan's guidance and support. We all learned so much from it and no doubt we will be taking that experience onto the next game.

What stage is your current project at?
Two weeks and 100 bugs to go.

"Regardless of the size of the project, one bad egg can really set you back and you can't afford that if you want to make hit after hit"

What was the last game you played, and what did you think of it?
It was *Capcom vs SNK 2* on the Dreamcast. It was a shame what happened to SNK because they had made some great games, but it was every beat 'em up fan's dream come true when these two companies got together and made this game.

How many hours a week do you actually spend playing games?
These last few months, perhaps only two hours a week. All that's going to change, though, after I'm done with *The Getaway*. I have been keeping a list of all the games I must go back to once the game is done and dusted.

Which aspect of it do you think will impress players the most?
How 'grown up' it is. By that I'm referring to both its storyline and game mechanics. It has an engaging plot that is serious and it doesn't patronise the player. We also had the balls to experiment with different ways of communicating information to the player such as the character's health, the navigation system, timer etc. It's resulted in an experience that feels more like taking part in an action film than a videogame.

What new development in videogames would you most like to see?
A magical formula that would allow us to make games in half the time.

What disappoints you about the industry?
That not many people are doing what they are best at, often they are just filling a position. There are many great talents around but it's extremely hard to get them all together for the same project. Regardless of the size of the project, one bad egg can really set you back and you can't afford that if you want to make hit after hit.

What do you enjoy most about working in the videogame industry?
It may sound really cheesy, but it's when you see people enjoying playing your game. Before we went to E3 earlier this year, we really didn't know how people were going to react to *The Getaway*, but all those late nights and design meetings were worth it in the end.

Whose work do you most admire?
Yu Suzuki for my misspent youth in the arcades, and Tetsuya Mizuguchi for giving us *Ulala* and *Rez*. I would love to get the chance to work with these two amazing game pioneers.

What new gaming platform are you most looking forward to?
I'd like to do a couple more games on the PlayStation2 before the PlayStation3 comes out.

What are your thoughts on mobile phone gaming?
When you look to Japan and see what they are doing with FOMA you'd think there must be something big just around the corner. If only everyone in the world could use their mobiles to hook onto a certain system and play together...

inbox

Communicate by post:
Letters, **Edge**, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath BA1 2BW
Or email:
edge@futurenet.co.uk

I'm a third year student at Bournemouth University where I'm studying towards a degree in Interactive Media Production. I'm currently looking for a professional work placement and I've been desperately trying to get into games development, but have so far met with little success. The problem I'm having is that our course is often overlooked in favour of 3D animation degrees, but much of what we are trained to do would also be of benefit to the games development process (including visual design, programming, sound design and producing) – we may lack specialist training, but we have a good grounding in a broad range of skills and have the potential to become highly useful workers.

We are realistic about such opportunities of course – no one expects to walk into a lead design role and we are prepared to start at any level and learn. However, my search has highlighted a disturbing trend (for me at least) within many of the larger developers – for an industry that claims to be forward thinking and constantly advancing nobody seems willing to offer training schemes or seems to want to invest in the long-term potential of employees.
Ben Brown

It is, of course, essential for the long-term health of the videogame industry that publishers and developers identify and address the need for qualified professionals. In the past this has largely happened on a piecemeal basis and, as your experience appears to confirm, one of the problems is that there is no common consensus regarding what sort of training or education courses are actually appropriate. Thankfully, though, it does seem as if things are about to change, with the likes of TIGA attempting to survey the needs of developers and trying to set up common standards.

Having just read Adam Phillip's comments in **E**116's Inbox, I thought that it was worth responding to some of his points.

Generally it seems to me that the videogame community is in a totally polarised and defensive 'my console is better than yours' position. This is nothing new of course and has been going on since the Speccy and C64 days. I had a BBC and magazines were continually attempting to justify why my 8bit computer was technically superior to the Commodore and Sinclair competitors (regardless of the fact that they both enjoyed a much larger user base). Things don't seem to have changed today.

In terms of cost, I accept his point that a brand new, top of the range PC from PC World can cost upwards of £1500. But it is also possible to buy a sub-2Gig PC for around £500, without extended warranty, scanner you'll never use and oodles of useless software that will get installed on day one, then never used again. And for that £500 I have something that I can play games on, do my accounts on, write documents and send emails with, etc. Oh yes, and I can use the Internet as well. Having had a Dreamcast I would argue that browsing the Web on a TV screen looks pants. And online gaming is only as good as the size of its community. The PC community has evolved and was not created by a corporate marketing department. Online console gaming will only succeed in the same evolutionary manner.

The main reason that I am still a PC gamer and not a console gamer is interestingly due to one of the reasons that Adrian cites as the reason he's a console gamer. Having owned a Sega Saturn and subsequently a Sega Dreamcast I am now stuck with two pieces of hardware that are totally obsolete. Yes, I can still play the games I bought for them and I still go back to play *MSR* and am slowly plodding through *Shenmue 2*, but there is nothing new out for either platform and therefore my hardware is redundant. I am simply reluctant to go out and buy a console that will turn out to be redundant within two years.
Robert Reynolds

One man's meat, it would seem, is another man's poison. But surely it's about time that we all grew up and acknowledged the strengths of every platform, and respected the hardware choices of others. Certainly **Edge** won't be printing any more letters devoted to platform advocacy.

Edge's comparison between the Dreamcast (RIP) and the Xbox missed out one crucial thing. The word Microsoft on the box. Many hardened gamers are put off by that monicker, be it people who realise just how unstable DirectX really is, people who 'use' WinME, or people who found that WinCE meant dodgy PC ports.

Microsoft appears to be betting on a broadband revolution, which (at least in this country) isn't going to happen. Most of the people who can afford broadband, will also be playing these games on their PC already by the time Xbox Live appears. I can't see people paying for two high-speed connections just to play through a different Microsoft unit.
Rob Mortimer

You're right to point out that Microsoft's reputation might have diminished the console's commercial success in some quarters, but in **Edge**'s opinion the company's reputation isn't a significant barrier to mainstream success. More important is that the company gets its marketing and pricing strategy right – and it certainly seems to be gaining ground in the run up to Christmas.

I've been playing videogames for years, and I can't honestly remember a time when I have been so disappointed with the quality of games on offer. Bar a few gems, most games that are released nowadays suck. They're kind of like Hollywood films – unsophisticated, dumbed-down rubbish engineered solely to blandly entertain and entice gullible schmucks to part with their money. Great graphics, fantastic SFX, amazing sound and music, shite dialogue, poor characterisation, formulaic, dull, unrewarding storylines – sound familiar?

> "For an industry that claims to be forward thinking nobody seems willing to offer training schemes or seems to want to invest in the long-term potential of employees"

Basically, this industry needs to grow up fast. We all know that even generic shooters aren't making money, so why not make something imaginative and exciting instead? It doesn't cost any more money to make, just more imagination. It's time that videogame producers started to deliver. And fast.

I'll finish by giving you my prediction for the next round of console-idation (sorry), as it seems to be the current 'hot topic' – Nintendo to stop making hardware, PS3 and Xbox2 to slug it out for market share, (a Sony win by a country mile, but Microsoft to have a more than healthy installed base) with Nintendo kingmaker. Just think, Nintendo producing games for Sony. Stranger things have happened.

Meanwhile, I'm off to play *Quazzatron* on a Spectrum emulator.

Mark Doyle

I am 17 years old and have grown up with videogames. I have watched the industry grow from strength to strength since I first received a Commodore 64 as a Christmas present. As a gamer I have always desired fresh and innovative experiences and I love to be dazzled by new ideas.

This desire I believe can be pinpointed in my gaming life to the Christmas Day I received *Nights into Dreams*, with the special controller. Ever since I experienced the game I have yearned each year for the industry to be pushed forward by dynamic and daring ideas, and on every occasion my prayers have been answered.

It is always in the Christmas holidays that I have had the 'definitive' gaming experience of the year. I study release schedules and check scores from all sources, establishing in my mind the perfect game. Over the years, highlights have included *Super Mario All Stars*, *Panzer Dragoon*, *Tekken*, *Super Mario 64* and *Shenmue*. From each one I gained a quality title to complete and every year since my love for games has blossomed I have witnessed it pushed in a new direction.

Now, though, I come to my present situation. There is under two months until Christmas and I have not found my game yet. All of my friends are tiring of the crap being churned out over the last year and we are constantly frustrated that the quality we are in search of is often hidden behind the quantity of an industry damaging itself.

One friend, who introduced me to **Edge** four years ago has just this year turned his back on the industry. He devotes no time to games and his creative appetite is no longer catered for by the industry. He lost his faith months ago and I ignored it initially, but now? Now I can't find 'my' game. This year has been the worst in memory for gaming experiences. I admit I am losing faith.

The industry is destroying itself by catering for idiots and not intellects. I get so angry and even worse is the fact that I understand it is my generation whom the industry is currently catering for. The industry, which once walked hand in hand with my young imagination, is now going to the bank instead of the drawing board. I can feel myself drifting from my favourite pastime. My friend turned to music for his fix, but I have no such saviour. I love games, but the stark reality is that if the industry cannot recognise that it's running out of ideas then I am afraid I'll have to say farewell.

David Valjalo

While we sympathise with your predicament, and, to a certain extent, agree that the industry is currently undermined by a preoccupation with product and profits at the expense of creative ingenuity, there's no shortage of first rate games on sale this Christmas. If you had enough money, you could be playing any or all of the following: *GTA: Vice City*, *Splinter Cell*, *TimeSplitters2*, *Colin McRae Rally 3*, *Ratchet & Clank*, *Eternal Darkness*, *Pro Evolution Soccer 2*, *Burnout 2*, *Lord of the Rings, The Two Towers*. And that's just a sample of the range of gaming experiences on offer – surely enough to resurrect anyone's love of gaming.



Better than *Halo*? Daniel Fox certainly thinks so, but it's not wise to judge a game from early demo code that wasn't intended to be seen by the public

I'm sure I'm not alone in having played the leaked alpha of *Doom III*. Upon hearing of its existence, like countless others I felt a mixture of disbelief followed by tremendous curiosity. Ever since the (very few) awesome screenshots were issued, I have been watching and waiting for more news. A few more screenshots. Then a candid movie of the E3 demo hits the Web. A skewed, blurry portal into the next generation viewed from behind an anonymous shoulder. How such a low grade movie drew so many people to one desk where I work is a mystery. And then we get to sample the engine for ourselves; at least those who can actually get it moving.

Jawdropping aside, I was left with the impression that obviously this is going to have a big impact on gaming. Whether hyperrealism is a good or bad thing; a topic often raised within the pages of **Edge**, *Doom III* will set an absurdly high benchmark. Whether id can match this in gameplay terms remains to be seen but I regard this, for once, as secondary. What is important is that the next generation will have at last arrived. No FPS worth its salt herefrom will be able to rely on the old painted puppetry principle that we've been treated to since *GoldenEye*. Even looking at the latest footage of upcoming titles such as *Splinter Cell* with its excellent atmosphere, and incredible lighting effects, the illusion is tainted by the prevailing 'woodenness' of the characters.

Whatever the outcome, the 'next generation' claims of the überconsoles have proved entirely fruitless with not one title displaying signs of the revolution we were promised. *Halo*? Not really. A big game, yes, but not a tremendous leap forward. Whether id will deliver a faultless gaming experience is of little consequence I believe. With technology such as that on offer, someone will.

Daniel Fox

Yes, the leaked demo code does demonstrate the technical excellence of the new *Doom* engine. But it's difficult to draw any firm conclusions from a demo that was never intended to be played by the public. And as for *Halo*, you might have found it visually disappointing, but it set new benchmarks in

"The industry is destroying itself by catering for idiots and not intellects. And even worse is the fact that I understand it is my generation whom the industry is currently catering for"



Craig Owen argues that more games like *Animal Crossing* are needed if the videogame industry is to increase the public esteem in which it is held

terms of play mechanics. **Edge** is currently hoping that *Doom III* will too, but we reserve judgement until id releases some meaningful code.

Whenever some random act of violence is carried out and no proper reason is found, some hack journalist will do his or her best to pin the blame on videogames. To take the most recent example; the case of the 'Washington Sniper'. It started small, a comment in the final lines of an article on the killings, a letter in 'The Washington Times' and so on. All that was needed was the perpetrator to be caught, a console or PC to be found in his home, and the real attack on the videogames would be underway. The industry got ready to dive under cover.

Then suddenly it turned out that the killers were black Muslims, one of whom was supposed to be an al-Qaeda sympathiser, the tabloid media had found a much better scapegoat. The industry breathed a sigh of relief and went back to work.

The industry was lucky this time, but it has been blamed for things like this before, and will be again. Yet it doesn't fight back, it doesn't tell the uninformed masses that what they read in the paper is not all true, that not all games are all violent bloodbaths. Why doesn't it rise up and defend itself. Where's the campaign to show people games that are not just fun to play, but bring people together. Adrian Crespo's letter about *Samba de Amigo* is an excellent example of this type of game, as is *Animal Crossing*.

We can sit and laugh smugly at all the stupid articles and rubbish in the tabloids, but there are people out there who believe every word they read. If the industry wants to take its rightful place with other forms of popular media it has to shake off the negative stigma attached to it, it has to act. It can't just sit there and take the allegations thrown at it.

Craig Owens

You are, of course, completely correct. But unfortunately, rational argument is not always sufficient to convince non-believers. Still, the industry should be doing more to try to convince non-gamers of the viability of the medium. Industry bodies should be prepared to sponsor unbiased research into the effects of videogames, and publishers should be more prepared to take a risk on the type of content that might draw in a wider audience.

Reading the cover story in **E**117 confirmed what I had known all along about the Xbox. Microsoft's mistake from day one was trying to compete head-on with Sony, the company that owns the console market, instead of gunning for an easier target like Nintendo. I guess it may have thought it could shake up the industry, just as Sony itself did all those years ago with the original PlayStation, but I think it's only thanks to Sony expanding the console market into a mainstream industry, with millions more consumers, that the Xbox hasn't become the new 3DO, instead of the new Dreamcast.

Sony's main weapon is its brand perception. When people think of Sony, they think of PlayStations, Walkmans, TVs, etc. When people think of Microsoft they think of Windows and Office. Sony makes entertainment products people choose to own, Microsoft makes productivity tools people must own because they have no choice.

Now, I'm not writing to condemn Microsoft or the Xbox. In fact, I have an Xbox (and a PlayStation2) and I think it's great. But Microsoft has been trying too hard to be the new Sony. Take the early Xbox TV commercials, for example – those 'womb to tomb' and 'jungle jive' things. They were trying to burrow into the subconscious of consumers just like Sony tried to with those dreadful David Lynch efforts.

But whereas Sony could get away with it because people knew what the PlayStation2 was, Microsoft couldn't because the Xbox was a mystery. That really hurt it when it launched (as did the price). And where have all the Microsoft commercials been since then? There are always PlayStation2 commercials on TV, building consumer awareness while Xbox slips further into obscurity.

Just as Sony's natural customers are existing PlayStation owners and casual gamers, Microsoft's are the people who made it what it is today: PC owners. You do see the odd Xbox ad in PC magazines but this is the area that Microsoft should be pushing, building its customer-base so it has a greater chance in round two. I have a PC too but great console games such as *Halo* and *TimeSplitters2* have made me postpone spending £1000 or so on an upgrade.

FPS games in particular are the staple diet of many PC gamers and the Xbox is home to some great examples already, with many more to come. I really feel that a lot more PC gamers would buy an Xbox if Microsoft took the time to promote it to them (and brought out a cable to connect it to a monitor). Games such as *Blinx* do nothing for its image.

People argue that Microsoft can afford to make a loss with the Xbox but will consumers be more likely to back them with the inevitable Xbox 2? Or will they back Sony, the company that's already dominated two generations of gameplay? It's gonna be a bloody fight but I do think Sony will win with its millions of loyal customers and a better launch line-up next time.

Jason Glover

In terms of software range and quality, the Xbox can certainly compete on an even footing with both PlayStation2 and GameCube, and there has been an increase in the incidence of Xbox TV advertisements recently.

However, it certainly does seem as though Microsoft underestimated the scale of Sony's achievement with both PSone and PlayStation2. In trying to emulate that achievement, the company seems to have been unaware of the holistic and sophisticated approach that Sony employed to build a brand from nothing into one of the most significant in Europe.

"If the industry wants to take its rightful place with other forms of popular media it has to shake off the negative stigma attached to it, it has to act"





Grand Theft Auto: Vice City has, rather predictably, generated rather a lot of interest on the Edge forums. But will we still be playing it in five years' time? The continuing appeal of GoldenEye just goes to show: good games never go out of fashion

From the forum

A selection of choice cuts from Edge-Online's discussion outlet (http://forum.edge-online.com)

Subject: ***Vice City* – Your favourite gaming moments so far**
Poster: **xX-FUTURE-Xx**

Got Vice City yesterday and played the game *all day*, something which I haven't done with any game in a long time. Anyway, one of the best moments so far for me was riding a motorbike along the beach with three police cars in pursuit. After a misjudged wheelie I ended up in the sea. Game Over. But not before all three police cars joined me with the fish.

Poster: **Templar Wizard**

My favourite moment so far: 'the chase'. Having a moving gunbattle while chasing a guy on a Vespa. I loved listening to 'Died in your Arms Tonight' while shooting out the boats and chopper in the 'get the drugs from the boat' mission.

Poster: **Defender**

The best bit for me has to be this: I'm on a PCG 600. The cops are after me. I'm listening to '99 Luftballoons'. I see a ramp, I go for it... and I soar into the air as the police go flying, just as the drums kick in on the chorus.

Poster: **Rignall's Haircut**

Speeding along flat out on the street bike, at night, in the pouring rain past all the garishly lit buildings with 'Crockett's Theme' playing on the radio. Very atmospheric.

Subject: **You have sustained a lethal injury**
Poster: **alks**

Walking around town yesterday looking for somewhere to buy a hoover (zzz) I stumbled across something that nearly made me cry in the street – an old arcade I used to visit, shut down, half boarded up with some machines still inside. Nestling at the back I could just make out *Operation Wolf*, lonely, dusty and smashed up. Needless to say, I was too distressed to continue hoover shopping.

Poster: **Treble**

What are you doing crying, you big ninny? Rescue them! Phone the estate agent and ask if there is an auction on the contents before the new tenants occupy the building. If it's got some good cabs, you could easy get people on here to buy them. Good God, man, the future of these cabs is in your hands! This could be the single most important event in your life.

Poster: **alks**

Quick update for anyone who was interested – looks like there's no hidden treasure. Apparently the place was broken into and vandalised quite a while ago and the undamaged cabs were sold. I'm going back to peer in through the windows in the daytime for a better look (it was dark last time I went) so I'll post another update if I see anything interesting.

Subject: ***GoldenEye* Fully Complete**
Poster: **Alan Stock**

Out of curiosity I was wondering how many people have done everything on *GoldenEye*. I'm talking: completion of all levels on 00Agent (including Aztec and Egyptian), all cheats. I finally did, last summer, but it took me about three years of on and off play to do it. I never would have done it if I hadn't been so bored... So, who else holds the *GoldenEye* Crown?

Poster: **Breaksmith**

Yes, it took me about six months from the launch of the game, I think. I did have to download a video of some chap doing the Facility cheat in order to have the faintest clue how to do it and it still took hundreds of attempts. But I did it finally. Yes.

Subject: **Multi-genre games**
Poster: **Chris on the moon**

After reading the article on *Haven* I was left wondering, are multi-genre games the way for the future? Possibly, but not in this way. I feel that when racing and shooting sections, for example, are put into platforming games, they are usually badly controlled pointless affairs.

The problem? They are pointless. If the game is good in other places, these mini-games often seem to stray away too much from the games otherwise solid formula. And the worst thing is, the levels don't have to be there, but they are essential to progress. What if you like platformers but really *hate* racing with a passion? Well, you're screwed.

Poster: **SamSim**

I think people restrict themselves too much by starting with a genre and then building a game about the term 'FPS', for example. Instead, they should start by saying, "What would be really fun? What would a gamer enjoy doing?"

Then they should go from there, and a game will be what it will be. If it's 'Conquer the World', 'Drive Really Fast', or simply 'Lob Bricks through Windows', then so be it. If it's 'Juggle Stuff' or 'Ride Massive Real Live Dinosaurs" or 'Walk on Water', then forget conformity, *do it*.

"The best bit for me has to be this: I'm listening to '99 Luftballoons'. I see a ramp, I go for it... and I soar into the air as the police go flying, just as the drums kick in"







Viewtiful Joe (GameCube)

page 042



Sudeki (Xbox)

page 048



Eve Online (PC)

page 034



Grand Theft Auto: Vice City (PlayStation2)

page 088



Mutant Storm (PC)

page 100



Legend of Zelda: Winds of Takuto (GameCube)

page 040

